

3-18-1975

Interview no. 482

Guillermo Villareal

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Guillermo Villarreal (1916-)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 18, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 482
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 482
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in Cd. Juárez, emigrated to El Paso with his family as a child; graduated from El Paso High School in 1935; has worked with the VFW and G.I. Forum.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical data; education; discrimination of Mexican Americans in education and jobs.

Length of Interview: 1 hour Length of Transcript: 22 pages

Guillermo Villarreal
by Oscar J. Martínez
March 18, 1975

M: First of all Mr. Villarreal, could you tell me where you were born and when you were born?

V: I was born in Juárez in 1916.

M: And how long did you live in Juárez before you came to El Paso?

V: I lived there about 12 years. I think I was 12 years old when we came here to El Paso.

M: Did you go to school in Juárez?

V: Yes. I went to school there and I went to school here in El Paso.

M: Up to what grade did you go to school in Juárez?

V: In Juárez, I went up to the third grade...no, fourth grade. I can't remember any more.

M: And what do you remember about your childhood in Juárez? How was it back then?

V: In what way?

M: Well, what are some of the things that you remember about your life in Juárez as a child? At home, at school.

V: Just going to school is what I remember...being at home, living there with my parents, brothers, and sisters. Nothing interesting, really.

M: Did your father work in Juárez?

V: He was working on this side with the railroad. He was a railroad man.

M: Did he commute over to El Paso?

V: No, he was working in Juárez with the railroad. It was an American company. I forgot what it was, I think it was Southwestern Railroad. And of course it went over into Chihuahua, but he was working in Juárez.

M: Oh, he didn't come across to this side?

V: No, he didn't come here to work.

- M: Do you remember having a good life in Juárez? How was your situation in the family?
- V: How was it? Well, I think it was a good life, that's all you could call it. No family problems except the little spanking once in a while. But no problems as far as family life was concerned. We were all happy. We knew our position and we knew our situation there, everybody did. And we just took it for granted.
- M: What did your father do on the the railroad?
- V: He worked in the...oh, I don't know. Working putting up ties and so on, on the tracks. Not a switchman or engineer, just a common laborer.
- M: And then did the whole family come over here?
- V: Yes, we emigrated. The whole family at one time.
- M: Why did your father decide to come here?
- V: That was during the Revolution and we had to come over here as immigrants, refugees. I think they called us refugees at that time.
- M: And when you came to El Paso, where did you settle?
- V: We lived all over the place. The first one I remember was on Eighth and Saint Vrain, right by the river. In fact, I fell down the river once...not the river, but the canal.
- M: It's a dangerous place.
- V: It was at that time. And then we moved to Piedras and what is now Paisano. And from there we went to other places. One time we moved by the cemetery, Concordia Cemetery on Stevens Street, then we came back to Rivera Street. From there we went to Bassett, then we came back over here again to Stanton Street.
- M: Why did you move around so much?
- V: I never understood why, probably we didn't pay the rent. (Laughter) I don't know why we moved around, I just went along with the family.

M: Did your father switch jobs?

V: No, he lost his job when we came over here. He didn't work for the railroad any more.

M: What kind of job did he get?

V: He was peddling vegetables. /He/ bought himself a small horse cart, and I used to go around with him.

M: Did you start school here right away ?

V: Yes, I started in Saint Ignatius and went there for about a year I think it was, at the most. Then I went to Beall school.

M: What do you remember about your school days at those two schools?

V: My memories are pretty good. I didn't know any better, I guess, so I just took everything for granted. My father used to tell me, "We are this kind so we have to stay this way. There is no sense in you thinking any higher than what your station calls for."

M: What did he mean by that?

V: Sometimes we got to talking and saying /that/ we would like to be better situated, have better homes, have a better job, and so on. And he said, "There is no sense in even thinking about it. You'll never get out of this kind of life, because we were born here. We're born this way, and that's the way it's gonna be. Just make up your mind /that/ when you grow up you're gonna be working for a living for somebody."

M: And did you have ideas of doing something different?

V: Yeah, I guess ideas like everybody else has--you're gonna be a lawyer, you're gonna be a doctor. You're gonna be something big, something you think at that time is big anyway. That's what I mean when he told me that. He used to say, "There's no sense in /it/. You're not gonna be a lawyer; you're never gonna be rich; you're not gonna have anything. This is just our

way of life, and this is the way you're born to it. This is where we're gonna stay."

M: But you weren't satisfied with that?

V: Well, I just took his word for it. I kept on reading. It was the same way with... I took a job when I first started going to high school. That was when my father and mother had already died. I had a spare time job in the grocery store here in town. During the summer I worked there full time. But during September I told the owner, "Well, I'm going to have to go back to school. I'll be working here in the afternoon, if you want me to." So, the owner's wife tried to discourage me. She said, "Well, I don't think there is any sense in you continuing your schooling." I said, "No, but I guess I'll go anyway." So she finally said, "Okay, go ahead and be a lawyer."

M: Is that what you wanted to be, a lawyer?

V: No, I didn't have any idea. I didn't say that I wanted to be a lawyer, I just said I wanted to go to school and study. But that's the way she put it, "Well, if you want to, go ahead and be a lawyer." She wanted me to keep on working there, so I did. I graduated from high school, but I didn't go any further. I had a hard time finishing high school.

M: Which high school did you go to?

V: El Paso High. I went to Bowie for a time, but I graduated from El Paso.

M: When did you graduate?

V: 1935, I think.

M: How was it at El Paso High when you were there?

V: Well, in some ways it confirmed what my father had told me. Chuckle I still did not realize how it was, because I took it for granted: I was not an Anglo, therefore sometimes I thought that I had no place going there, that it was not my place to be there. And I was treated by some of the

teachers as if I did not belong.

M: Do you remember some specific incidents?

V: The one that I haven't been able to forget... My intention of going to school was to learn and get as much learning as I could. My grades were pretty good, I had a straight "A" average. During the senior year, anybody who had a straight "A" average had the honor of belonging to the Honor Club. Of course, the teacher that was in charge of that had to call you to ask you in, but I was never called. One time I just inquired if I was eligible, so she told me, "Yeah, you can come in." I never attended any of the meetings or parties. I was having a hard time -- no clothes, no nothing. I didn't feel that I should go to any of their meetings, so I didn't go. And one time, they were gonna have a party in one of the students' home, and I was told that I had to go, but I didn't. So then the teacher went to the principal and reported. The principal had me in the office and she was there. She said, "We have to put him out of the club. He doesn't go to our meetings." So, I was out.

M: Did this happen to other Mexican students that you know of?

V: One other that I knew of, yeah.

M: The same thing?

V: Uhum.

M: So it was mostly an Anglo Honor Society club?

V: Well, I remember there was one girl who was a Mexican, but she was wealthy. She came from a well-to-do family. That was my drawback. Most of them, well, they were dressed like they should be, and I didn't have any...sometimes I had to go barefoot. So I didn't feel that I could go to any social function at all.

M: You went to school barefoot?

V: Yes.

M: Did other students go that way, too?

V: Yes, and we were not hippies. /Laughs/.

M: It was out of necessity.

V: Out of necessity, yeah. We were living out there by Concordia Cemetery, so we would walk up here to high school. We never thought anything about walking, you know, nobody even thought about having a car. So, that's the way it was.

M: So you were in high school during the Depression then?

V: That's when I got out. I had several jobs...a lot of jobs. I think I worked at everything that you can think of. I worked for Peyton's in the slaughterhouse; I became a baker, and worked for a bakery as an oven man; I worked for grocery stores. Later, I worked as a rent collector, and then from there, I went to selling insurance.

Right after I got out of school, I worked for General Electric as a stock clerk in the office keeping track of the inventory. Then they had to close the office because of the Depression, so I went to work in the bakery and other places.

My idea really when I was going to high school was to be an accountant, a CPA. After I finished school, I managed to continue bookkeeping courses by correspondence from the International School in Chicago. I got my diploma, and I was ready to take a CPA /exam/, but then /my/ economic situation did not permit me to go to Austin to take the CPA examination. I never got it. After that I sold electrical appliances. I tried to set up my own accounting business at home. I had several accounts, /but/ I didn't have enough to really make it pay, so I just let that go.

M: Did you ever have any trouble getting a job because you were Mexican?

V: Yeah.

M: What kind of trouble?

V: I applied to the bank. And whoever was in charge, I forgot who it was, just gave me an application and looked at me; they didn't say anything, but I could tell. And I guess it was my attitude also, that, I went there, the way I felt myself, that I was trying for something that I could not get at all. So, I didn't get a job. And the best one that I could get was selling, 'cause I had to go from house to house. So, I picked my own territories where I knew I would have a better chance.

M: Was that the only time you remember that kind of a situation, not getting a job because you were Mexican?

V: That's the only one I can remember.

M: Have you experienced any discrimination because you were Mexican?

V: Oh, yes. We sure did. That's what got me started here in the discrimination business, you might call it.

M: Can you tell me about it?

V: My activities really began when I came back from the war. I got together with other men who had gone over, and we thought that we were entitled to better treatment because we had made a sacrifice. We saw that nobody actually cared, so we thought we might be able to do something. The first thing I got involved in was the housing problem over here in South El Paso. I guess you remember the way it was. I joined an organization that I thought were doing the kind of work that I would like to do. That was the VFW.

M: Veterans of Foreign Wars?

V: Veterans of Foreign Wars. And I induced a lot of my friends to join with me so that we could work together. We made a campaign for better housing. I marched around the town with a banner denouncing the way it was. We did accomplish a

little bit. It used to be they didn't have any street lights there, and most of the alleys were not paved, and they were dirty. So, we managed to get a few of them cleaned, and we managed to get some lights in the district. And just you know, sort of talking things over.

M: You marched to City Hall?

V: No, we didn't march on City Hall, we marched around South El Paso. We were afraid to march down to City Hall. At that time, there was still...discrimination here was really bad.

M: In what form was it bad?

V: Well, one form was that nobody cared what happened in South El Paso. Education, the schools over there were the lowest you could get. Bowie High School was one of the victims. They never got any new furniture or new equipment. Whatever equipment was discarded from over here, especially from Austin, was sent over to Bowie. They didn't have good teachers, they could get the worst. I mean, not the worst, but those [that were] not as well qualified as in other places. At that time we started inquiring about reasons for something or other. One of the inquiries we made was about why the Mexican Americans were not hired in government fields. We inquired about why there were no Mexican Americans in the Police Department or in the Fire Department. And I got the answer from the then Fire Chief saying, "Well, do you realize that these men have to sleep in the same room 24 hours every other day?" I think they considered it a disgrace for a Mexican to be among the Anglos sleeping in the same room.

M: This was when? When did this person...?

V: Oh, about 1948, '49.

M: And he was serious?

V: Yeah. I asked him why there were no Mexicans in the Fire Department. There were none in the Police Department at that time. And Negroes, why, nobody

ever thought about getting a Negro in any kind of work like that where they had to mix.

M: Did Mexicans try to get into the Police or the Fire Department?

V: During that time, yes. We made it a point to make applications. I didn't make an application, but somebody else did.

M: How did they keep 'em out?

V: Well, they just said, "There's no place for you." Nobody has to hire anybody just because they put up an application. They would say, "There's nothing." The Gas Company, only, up to oh, about, maybe ten years ago, they would not hire Mexicans. They would hire them digging ditches and reading meters, and so on, but not in the office.

M: Up until ten years ago you say?

V: More or less.

M: What other companies or stores in the area had the same problems here? Would you say that that was common?

V: Yes. As I said, we grew up feeling that we should not even apply to the Gas Company for a job--it was just not for us. We should not even apply to the Police Department, we shouldn't apply here or there.

As far as teachers were concerned, there was nothing there either, none of those jobs. During 1948 there was a school election for the School Board. One of our members was going to UTEP; well, then it was Texas Western. He was ready to graduate and we convinced him to run for the School Board. At that time he had a part time job as a reporter with the Times. They didn't throw him out because it would look bad, but they just wouldn't even give him any assignments. I was his campaign manager, by the way. And we worked, we didn't have any money. We finally raised a little money to pay for one TV broadcast, and he put up his argument. Everybody pitched in, of course,

campaigning from door to door. He lost. After the election, he didn't have a job. And he could not get a job in town, so he had to leave.

M: Where did he go?

V: He went to San Antonio. Nobody would hire him.

M: Because he ran for the School Board?

V: Because he ran for the School Board.

M: What kind of a job was he applying for?

V: Well, anything he could get...he graduated from the college. He was working for the Times as a reporter, but they said there was no more work for him to do, so out he goes. And he started looking for another job, but there was nothing available in town. There were other people that had to leave town also for the same reasons. They tried to run me out of town, but at that time I had started here my own business, such as it was, so I was not responsible for anybody. Nobody could fire me. And yet, all the companies that I had were from out of town. I could not get one locally.

M: You couldn't get business from El Paso?

V: An insurance agent, an independent agent, has to have an appointment from an insurance company. And there were several companies in El Paso who gave out contracts to agencies. Well, I could not get one myself. So, I dealt directly with the companies that did not have representation in El Paso, and I got a contract with them. They didn't know me, they never came here. All they wanted was the business, and they were satisfied. So that way I was not dependent on anybody to fire me. But, still there was pressure in other ways. I could not get enough business to live on.

M: What kind of pressure did you have?

V: Well, there are so many ways in which... A businessman can go around to talk to other businessmen and say, "Just keep away from that." At that time, it was

the thing to do with anybody who offered any resistance or any protest, label them a Communist. That's how this man, David Botello...he said that he was labeled as a Communist, an undesirable in the city. I was labeled as a Communist.

M: Why were you labeled as a Communist? What was it that you said that caused them to label you as a Communist? Did you say something that caused this?

V: No, no, they just said, "He's a Communist, he doesn't belong here. He is using Communist tactics and ideas."

M: Who said that?

V: Those people who were against any betterment of the Mexican Americans. That's the way it has always been. We are just upstarts and trying to get into business where we do not belong.

M: The newspapers?

V: Oh, yes.

M: Did the newspapers call you a Communist?

V: I just told you that they fired this boy because of his activities. And there were others that were fired. We ran for different offices, just to run. We knew we didn't have a chance, because we were not organized. We had no money for campaigns. It is not easy to run a campaign on a shoestring, and worse when you don't even have the shoestring. But we used it as a means of being able to express our ideas.

M: Did you participate in LULAC activities?

V: Yes, some.

M: When you were doing all of this, what organization were you working with?

V: The VFW.

M: The VFW. LULAC was around at that time, too, wasn't it?

V: No, not yet, it started later. It started, I believe, in Corpus Christi

to fight the discrimination against the Mexican American. That was the main purpose at that time.

M: Was the Veterans of Foreign Wars organization the main one that Mexicans were working in to...?

V: No, there were other chapters in town, and even at that /time/ they were divided. There was one Anglo group and there was our group in South El Paso, all Mexican Americans. The Anglo group was not as active in discrimination fights. We were organized over there mostly to try to better conditions in South El Paso. We did manage to get this Armijo Park started. We got enough money to build the swimming pool and we built bath houses. There was a row of bath houses there in Armijo Park. We used to charge a dime for anybody wanting to take a bath. /We did/ little things like that.

M: Were you active in the Raymond Telles campaign?

V: Yes.

M: Can you tell me about that? How was that campaign?

V: I wouldn't know how to even start on that. This thing has been a continuous thing from way back up to now. And there is nothing I can say /about/ when it started. We were just branching out into everything. At one time I joined the NAACP, the Negro organization. I was instrumental in bringing the Negroes into the community way of life. Before that, the Negroes were not accepted anywhere--not in restaurants or theatres or public places at all. We started to fight, I with them. There were some college professors that came into our group. We induced some of the Black people to just go into the restaurants, like the Oasis, for instance. They would /just/ sit there and the waitress had instructions not to even notice them. At the beginning, they were told to leave, but then when they found out what we were trying to do, they just left them alone -- but they would not be served.

Some of them did buy tickets to the Plaza Theatre, but that's as far as they got in, as far as the theatre, buying the ticket. They would not be let inside the door. It was quite a struggle. Let's see, I believe there was two professors, doctors.

M: Do you remember their names?

V: No. Maybe I can find them, I have all kinds of records, clippings. I have a whole history, but it's not organized.

M: You kept records of the meetings and clippings of newspapers and things that have been published by your organization?

V: Yes, things that I published myself. This is when I was investigated as a Communist, when I wrote "Thinking Out Loud." It gave them something special to think about. No, I can't find that name. Anyway, here was a doctor, a college professor, and he was involved. There were two of them, in fact, and they were thrown out of the college.

M: Oh, they were?

V: Yes, sir! So you'd better be careful! (Laughter) Then I had another one also, who we had in our group during the fight against the discrimination for the Negroes. He was working for the YMCA. He was in charge of this camp they have up there, the Skyhigh. I think it was called, where they took boys from underprivileged families. One summer he decided, "Well, we're taking underprivileged boys, well take him." And he made the mistake of taking one little Mexican American. He came back with this boy, but after that, he was there no more. They put him out because of that.

M: From the college?

V: No, from the YMCA. He was teaching at the college, but also doing this kind of work with the YMCA, taking the boys to camp. The YMCA has a camp where they take all these boys.

M: Was the Telles campaign a campaign that divided the two communities, the Anglo and the Mexican communities?

V: I believe so, yes. I would say that it was the only time that the greatest number of Mexican Americans have united for one particular political purpose.

M: Why did they unite, then?

V: They wanted to get Telles in office. He had been involved in all this kind of work from the time I was. So, he was well known, and he had done good jobs, good work. He had worked for the County, and he had held an office, so we thought he would be the right man for us.

M: Did he have Anglo support?

V: Yes, he had some support. It was not what you may call a 100 percent division, but there were more Mexican Americans voting that time, and for the same man. Other times they were divided because of the opposition.

M: Did the opposition use any tactics that were...what kind of tactics did they use?

V: In jobs. A factory which employs any number of men can just make it known, "I'm gonna vote for so and so. I'm not telling you who to vote for, but this is the one I'm voting for." Just a very subtle idea. So what is the employee going to do? "Suppose my boss finds out that I voted against him, where would I be?"

M: How could he find out?

V: [Laughs]. How would he find out? Well, I'm not going into that either. But that's the way they are controlled.

M: Did you have to sign your ballot?

V: Well, not particularly, it is not needed. Everybody knows what you are doing and where you are going, who you are supporting, and so on. So you'd better not let you boss know that you voted against him.

M: Do you know specific companies that did this?

V: No, I couldn't say which ones or when or how, but that's the way it was done.

M: It's not done like that any more?

V: Oh, yes. Politics is politics. [Chuckle] There is no question of this, no way to change it. And if you are not a politician that is willing to do this sort of thing, why, you just don't have any business in politics 'cause you'll never get anywhere. So it is just accepted that if you're a politician, a known politician, I know the kind of man you are. You have to be.

M: Just to survive.

V: Just to survive, yes.

M: Was there little activity in the Mexican American community before the War?

V: There was very little, yes.

M: What caused more activity to be generated after the War?

V: Well, what caused me, I would say, was going out of the city and finding out that we were missing a lot of things, for no reason at all...missing out on housing. We saw how people lived, and we said, "Why can't we have the same things? Why do we have to live in this tenement district? Why do we have to live in those tenements without a bath, without a toilet? And a family of ten crowded into two small rooms, with no lights, with no gas, nothing." Running water was outside. None of the rooms had any running water. If you want to take a bath, you just got yourself a big tub, filled it with water, and took you bath there. If it was during the summer, we... When I was living over on Tenth Street, the building was made in a square, and in the middle was called the patio shared by everybody going in and out. So we used to put our water there and take our baths outside during the summer, nobody thought anything about it. Nobody had ever seen a bathtub, so we just thought this was the way to do it. I never dared go beyond this place here. That was not my place.

M: Where did you go during the War? Where were you stationed?

V: I went to Europe. I was in Europe all the time, during the invasion and before

the invasion. In high school I had studied French, and that was my undoing in the Army. They told me, "Well, you're a 'Frenchman'." So before the invasion, they took me over in a boat across the channel and put me with the underground.

M: You worked with the French underground?

V: Yes, the Maquis. Our main job was to pick up the aviators who had fallen during the bombardment, and carry them across the border to Portugal so they could go back to England to get another plane. That was during the German occupation. And we had some demolition jobs, things like that. I was with the military intelligence department.

M: How were your experiences as a Mexican in the Army?

V: Well, most of them, except for the training going over here in the States, there was no cause to think about me as a Mexican. Over there, actually, I was not a Mexican, I was just an American, because I spent most of my time in Europe away from the Army. Of course I was in the Army, but since we had to work, we could not even wear a uniform. How could we? So nobody knew I was in the Army, except those that I worked with. So there was no question about my nationality, over there.

M: What experiences did you have during your training?

V: In training? I didn't see any discrimination, not in the Army. There was with individuals, and only those who had lived in the South. I noticed over there, people that I knew from the North, from New York for instance, I made friends there and nobody thought anything about it. We were just in the Army together and there was nothing else to think about. We were all training, so we went to train. So that's when I came back and did all this kind of work here. It was about two years ago that I had a big problem in Ft. Bliss. I don't know if you read about it or not.

M: Yes, I read it in Nosotros magazine. Is that the one you are referring to?

Discrimination?

V: Yes, discrimination at Ft. Bliss, and open discrimination. I finally obtained the services of the Equal Employment Opportunity officer in Dallas. He came here and held a hearing, and he found that there was actual discrimination. That's as far as he went, he just wanted to leave it that way, so I made it a point to send the report on to Washington. And they came back and fired two of the people that were responsible for the discrimination.

M: What kind of discrimination was it?

V: Mexican Americans were not given any, I can't say privileges, but... For instance, overtime work, they could not get any, unless they needed somebody in the freezer. And that job was given only to the Mexican Americans. That's not an easy job, to stand there for hours and hours in freezing temperatures. Nobody would do anything about it. They'd just say, "This is the man we want to be here," that's all. They were not given any promotions for years and years. Men that worked there for 10 or 15 years never got a promotion of any kind. Yet, some Anglo man will go there, new, and they would put him as a foreman. That was discovered in the hearing, things like that. The Mexican Americans could protest but nobody paid any attention to them, so we fixed that up. It's a little better now. There have been some promotions and better equal opportunity now.

I spearheaded a drive to make our mayor resign. He was a racist from way back.

M: Which one?

V: Judson Williams. I knew him at Texas Western, he was the Dean of Students. I remember one time there was two boys caught drinking on campus in a car, one Anglo and one Mexican. He called them both into the office--they were both just as guilty, they were caught red-handed with the bottle in their mouth and so on--but he talked to them separately. He banned the Mexican American; he expelled him from the college. The Anglo stayed. That was only one example.

Then, he went to work at the White House. He treated the employees the same way or worse, because he was put there in charge, so he was his own boss. Then he went to the Chamber of Commerce, in preparation for his mayor's job. He came in office. It had been a custom for years and years that the El Paso mayor always invites the Mexican mayor of Juárez to their inauguration dinner. Well, he just forgot about it, it just slipped his mind. And as soon as he took office, he started firing all the Mexican Americans that had attained certain positions of responsibility, either firing them or putting them down. Until LULAC and the GI Forum, the then presidents of those organizations, and a couple of other organizations, had a talk with him and said, "You better put a stop to this." He did, but the harm had been done already. So he got worse. So during his second year, I started a campaign to just throw him out. Before quitting he announced that the Governor had promised him to make him president of the university. That is what I could not take. So, I got a few professors together, and we started a campaign. I spearheaded it. We needed about 20,000 signatures to have a recall election. We made charges against him in newspapers.

M: What charges?

V: Mostly discrimination and misuse of his office. We made about four or five charges. I kept giving out articles to, the newspapers on our progress and so on. Finally, I got about 14,000 signatures. I needed a few more, and just about that time, he said that somebody offered him a job, so he resigned. "I have to resign, I don't want to, but I have such a good offer, so I'm gonna take this other job." It was only two months before his term of office expired, but we did get him to resign. The main thing that we tried to do was to keep him from the university, that was the main purpose. We had a lot to do with the regents and with the Governor. But the Governor owed him a political

debt, so that's why he promised him to give him this job.

M: And when was that?

V: That was about six years ago, or eight.

M: Was that the only recall election that...?

V: It had never happened before. We did not have the election.

M: The only recall effort?

V: The only recall effort, yes. We had the Police Department on our side; we had the firemen on our side. You had to step carefully going to the Chiefs at that time, but we got permission to canvas the police force and the fire department. We got a lot of signatures from all over town. That's part of my work. If something happens that relates to that particular problem, we take up the fight. I did not succeed in getting an Equal Employment Opportunity office here in El Paso, but I haven't forgotten it; I haven't given it up. I tried. I went to Washington to talk, and didn't get anywhere. I even wrote a letter to President Johnson about it, and so on, trying to get something here in El Paso so we could have equal employment opportunities, somebody to complain to. The closest we have now is in Albuquerque. Somebody makes a complaint, well, it takes years for the case to come up for investigation. That's one of the handicaps that we had over here in Ft. Bliss. We had a lot of complaints, but nobody did anything about it. So the people finally got tired, some of them did, and they just simply quit.

M: Is there discrimination in El Paso now?

V: I don't know. Chuckle I don't think that will ever end. No, that's something you cannot take away from people. It's something you cannot insert into people no matter how many laws you pass. There is a law that, it's against the law to keep Negroes away from public places. But you cannot pass a law and say you're not a Negro anymore, you are white. That's the same thing, it comes to the same thing. The law is there, but how

can you make people change their feelings? It is not possible.

You have your own feelings and you will always have them. You were born with them and there is no way which you can change. It's part of you, it's in your blood. Whatever you feel, it is because you feel it, not because of any other reason, not because of your education, and not because of your environment. A person of Mexican heritage born in Europe will have the same feelings as a Mexican born in Mexico. A Negro born here, even after all these generations have passed, still has the same inside feelings that he had in Africa. So you cannot change that -- it just is not possible, it's unnatural. But, you can try. For instance, if you feel hate toward somebody for any reason, you can bring yourself to cut down that hate. And even if you don't feel it, you can appear to love him instead of hating him if you have enough fortitude to do it, and if you want to do it. But as far as the natural feeling in you, you cannot change it. So that may answer your question, does discrimination still exist? It does, just like the feeling of greed. You will never eliminate greed, so that's the way it is. We can try to make people understand that we are all brothers, and some of them, reluctantly, will agree. Others may be able to see that it is the way to be.

M: Has there been discrimination in housing here toward Mexcians?

V: Yes. I consider it discrimination the way this public housing is built. They're tearing down the tenement houses, which is what we were fighting for. We were fighting to have these slums eliminated. Well, they were eliminated, there's no more slums there, but nobody thought about the people. The slums were destroyed, without making any provisions for the people to go and live somewhere else. Now the public houses are being built. Where are they being built? Way out in the city. Isn't that discrimination? You cannot build a house here in town, oh no. This is not the place for it. Not only that, but moving out there

took away the transportation. How can they get into town? Have you visited the housing projects? You know where they are? Well, look around and see where they are.

M: I know there's one up in the Upper Valley.

V: In the Upper Valley, yes. Some over here by the desert in Northeast. Then the city, I'm gonna say Hervey, purchased the street cars. Is that to improve transportation? The street cars are rotting over there at the barn, what does he care about it? Let the people walk. What has he done for the other transportation, the buses? Nothing. So don't you call that discrimination? You have a car, you don't care whether there's any buses or not. I have one too. But the poor people and the majority of the citizens are the ones who are suffering. He got into a fight with México. He doesn't care what happens. That's discrimination. The worst part of it, he discriminated against the Mexicans in México. He tried to go over the heads of the city government in Juárez and he went over to talk to the President. Well, he got the surprise of his life. The President didn't even talk to him. He thought he could carry his money over there and say, "I'm gonna get what I want." That's discrimination. So, that's the way it is. All they're trying to do is building up this Civic Center thing. For who? Who is gonna take advantage of it? Who is gonna profit by it? Those people in the housing project? Do they get any benefits? He wants to get transportation from Juárez to the Civic Center. What about the maids who have to work all over town? How are they gonna get up there? Did he ever think about that? You tell me!

M: Do you think it'll get better?

V: We can always hope. We can always hope.

M: I've more or less run out of questions and I see the tape is running out.

V: Oh, I forgot to tell you that I organized this El Paso Literacy Council in 1966.

That was a volunteer project. I had Anglos, Mexicans, truck drivers, college professors, everybody involved for free, giving lessons in English to /non-English/ speaking persons. We took care of hundreds of people, not at the university level, not even the grade level, but /we taught them/ enough English so they could pass a citizenship test, and enough so they could get along in their jobs. Maids used to go to the home, they didn't even know what a broom was. They did not even know how to use the telephone in case of an emergency. We gave them that kind of instruction for free. At one time I had about 100 people involved, two hours a night, twice a week, teaching people--all volunteer work.

M: It must have been some job.

V: Boy, I'll say it was. I am still doing it, but not on such a big scale since the public schools took it up. They said they were going to.

M: Well, I've run out of questions, if you have something you think you want to...

V: I am not running out of answers!

M: We can turn the tape around actually.

V: No, no, this is enough. You will have to make it into a biography.

M: You've given me some very good information. Thank you very much.