

11-25-1977

Interview no. 490

Cerefino Anchondo Jr.

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Interview with Cerefino Anchondo Jr. by Humberto Cenicerros, 1977, "Interview no. 490," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Cerefino Anchondo Jr.
INTERVIEWER: Humberto Cenicerros
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 25, 1977
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 490
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Union organizer

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical data; work with unions; the Chicano Movement; politics.

Length of Interview: _____ Length of Transcript: 11 pages

Ceferino Anchondo Jr.
by Humberto Cenicerros
November 25, 1977

C: Mr. Anchondo, could you give me the place and date of your birth?

A: I was born in Smeltertown, or what used to be called Smeltertown, which has since been annexed by the city of El Paso, in 1935, December 17. Five years later we moved out of Smeltertown into El Paso.

C: This is where you grew up?

A: That's right.

C: What was your father's occupation?

A: My father's occupation was a miner. He was a miner for American Mine and Smelter in Smeltertown, I guess that's why they named it Smeltertown. It is now called ASARCO.

C: Making reference to your childhood, could you point out in reference to your community any interesting or significant events that stick out in your memory?

A: I remember a gazebo that they built there where I lived in Smeltertown. It was in the area in the refinery. There was a bunch of housing projects and the workers used to live there, and this is where I grew up. I remember that gazebo, it stands in my memory. When we moved here from there, I sort of missed it, I don't know why. When I was five we moved out of there and my dad was very, very active with unions. He was fired from the Smelter because of this.

C: Continuing Mr. Anchondo, could you tell me where and what years you attended high school?

A: I attended Thomas Jefferson High School. I started in 1950 or '51.

C: Did you belong to any certain activities in school?

A: Well, I played a lot of sports. I was interested basically in sports.

C: As far as the school was concerned, Jefferson, were there certain activities,

cultural activities, that the school as a whole used to participate in?

A: I am pretty sure that there were; I wasn't really involved. I just concentrated basically on sports.

C: As a young adult right after high school, how would you say you spent most of your recreational time or free time?

A: I was a race driver. We came up with what we think was the first hot-rod club in El Paso. So we used to fix up our cars, we used to spend a lot of our leisure time fixing up our cars.

C: Do you remember the name of the car club?

A: It was called the "HOOD-LIFTERS".

C: What was your first job?

A: Well, my first job was a milkman's helper. My father was a milkman, so I started helping my dad when I was very young. I learned to drive when I was eight. I got my first commercial license when I was fourteen. So that was really my first job.

C: What was your most gainful and permanent employment?

A: Working with unions as a union representative--labor unions. I spent close to 20 years doing this, and I traveled the 13 western states.

C: What led you to get involved with the unions?

A: I guess I was surrounded by it and I grew into it. All of my surroundings was around the working people. My dad, I used to go help him pass out handbills when he was out organizing throughout El Paso. So I used to travel a lot; he carried me around with him everywhere.

C: Were there a lot of labor unions around at that time?

A: Not really, just a few. Well, you know, you've got your normal construction labor unions, but there were not many shop unions. You had your coal,

Teamsters, and trucking, and you had your railroad unions. Other than that, there was not that much. My dad was also one of the first organizers of the clothing industry dating back many years to the late, late '30s, early '40s. I recall one in particular, Hicks Hayward, which later became Bluebell, which then later became Hicks Ponder. So that's what led me into that field, I grew into it. I used to see a lot of people that didn't know how to fight back, and I saw some that were very helpless.

C: Mr. Anchondo, let me ask you, generally speaking to the best of your memory, what kind of people made up the mass of or majority of the people or laborers?

A: They were really poor people; very, very poor people with very little education and large families--tenement type-dwellers. And a good many of them lived in Juárez.

C: So were they of any particular nationality?

A: Oh yes, Mexican American. Well, the border has always been this way. You have got your very ample supply of Mexican nationals coming to work and work very hard.

C: I was wondering if you could just briefly give us a rundown of your experiences with the labor unions in El Paso. Generally, how does a union work, its basic organization?

A: Well, of course I learned at a very young age that a guy going into it would have to...his best bet would first familiarize himself with labor laws, the act itself (the National Labor Relations Act), to find out what rights you have, and what rights the people have. Also what rights management has, what rights are guaranteed to you. Once you learn what

it is, you can just take it from there. Basically you are going out to talk to people, find out what they need and desire, then you try to go first by their needs because their desires are something you really hope for. Very seldom do you get their desires.

C: You try first for their needs?

A: Yes, that's right.

C: Do you, taking a little more historical view, recall the Depression and how it affected your community and your life?

A: Well, during those years I recall a lot more women were working, and it reminded me of not too long ago when I was up in California when I saw masses of women working in the canneries, and this took me back. Very briefly I remember that there was a lot of women working and that we had shortages. We had a lot of women cab drivers and today we hardly have any. Of course, it was rough because of the food stamps you had to live on and it was very hard. We were very poor and money was very scarce.

C: Was the food stamp program then similar to the program now?

A: I couldn't tell you very much about that because I was very young, but it appears to me that it may have been.

C: What do you recall about World War II?

A: World War II--I recall all my uncles went to war from both sides, my father's and mother's sides of the families. My dad was never accepted. Not that he was 4-F or anything. He was so involved in unions that in those years a lot of people thought that a union man was a communist, so it was very hard. I carry my dad's name, I am a junior; and even myself, when I joined the naval reserve and when I asked for my active

duty, they refused to give it to me. They used the excuse that there was a lot of unmarried guys who could do better, that a single man could do better than a married man. So they said I was a married man and I needed to support my family. I always thought that there was something that got rubbed on me because of my name. Of course, in unions you have your good people and bad people, and I feel that there are more bank presidents behind bars than labor leaders. So it left a sour taste in my mouth because I really wanted to go. I felt that they deprived me of this.

C: How about the Chicano movement that really got steam rolling in the 60s? How did you view the Chicano movement and what did it mean to you?

A: Well, of course being a native Texan and having my age, I can honestly say that I can recall seeing signs in restaurants that said, "No Mexicans or Dogs Allowed."

C: Do you think you could give us a reference date about these signs?

A: I guess I could go back to the '40s, and even to the late '40s there were still signs right here in Sierra Blanca. When my dad was a milkman we used to deliver milk to a restaurant there, and we walked into the same place where we would deliver milk to eat. My dad looks like an Anglo; he has blue eyes and very light complected. So if you saw the guy you would think he was an anglo but he is not; he is from Chihuahua. We walked into the restaurant and sat down to have breakfast. They served my father but they would not serve me. They told my dad that I would have to eat in the kitchen. So that was the last time we delivered milk. The Chicano movement, I guess it was inevitable because even in our high schools they would not allow us to speak Spanish.

Anyone who ever did get demerits or taken to the principal's to get swatted.

C: Then you were actively punished for speaking Spanish?

A: Oh, yes; we sure were. That, or you were grabbed by your ears and your ears were pulled and that sort of thing. A lot of nonsense. We have had, traditionally, the biggest drop-out rate, maybe as bad as the Black, but then El Paso is basically Chicano.

The Chicano movement was inevitable. Somebody had to speak up and point out the injustices. I was a little bit involved, but of course I didn't have the money or the means to travel around very much because I got married very young. I left school to get married when I was eighteen. I don't regret it but I wish I had stayed. I didn't get along with the principal. And my sister was the first valedictorian at Jefferson, so everyone wanted me to be a brain also. I was hitting it all right, I had about a B average. I guess if I had concentrated a little bit more I could have done a little bit better, but I was more active with sports and car racing. I was really in no hurry to become a wizard in school. I didn't get my diploma. I had to get it later when I had more time. When I started in the labor movement myself I was on the road and I was away from my family and I didn't really have time to go to school until 1972 in California. I had to take a Lasalle correspondence course to get my diploma. I never gave myself time to study. I was always out representing people with problems, so I never really had time for myself or my family -- not even on Saturdays or Sundays. Saturdays were always taken up by union meetings or meetings for this or that, so that I really missed school. Later on I started to pick up books

here and there. I learned labor law in libraries, sitting in courtrooms and /watching how the attorneys presented their cases. And that is the way I learned.

C: In your opinion on the Chicano movement as a whole, would you classify it as a very united movement? Do you think there is a strong unity among all Chicanos?

A: I don't think so. I have traveled many states and everywhere it is the same. You have, one, the Chicano from the U.S., and then you have the one that was not born in the U.S. but migrated into the U.S., and these people bring in some different ideas than the ones we have here. I think that the people from Mexico have stronger ideas. There is a little bit more pride I think than the ones here because they can say, "I am genuine Mexican." So the individual born here, the best he can say is that his mom or his dad came from over there, so that makes a difference. I think that difference divides. The necessities are also different and the atmosphere where they grew up. The needs and wants from over there are a lot greater. This is why I feel that that individual from across the border is a little more aggressive and he is not afraid to beg or to be more humble or tend to be more humble. They tend to lean backwards more to please you. That is why I don't think we will ever be united. I think that it is really something impossible. I may be wrong, but that is the way I have felt it everywhere I have been. And we tend to be also jealous of each other.

C: Can you remember the first time you ever voted?

A: I was 21 and I voted here in El Paso. I do not recall what the issues were or who the candidates were. We used to have here what we used to

call Poll Tax, and you had to pay in order to vote. But whenever you turned 21, your first vote was free. Thereafter you had to pay Poll Tax.

C: In your opinion, how has your political awareness always been? Have you always been aware of political happenings around you or has this only come recently?

A: I have been aware of the movement for many years, but I think I became more conscious, more active with a feeling of what I was doing, I guess, at the age of 28, thirty. Before it was just something I wanted to do--I liked the guy, I liked what he stood for and wanted to help him. But later I began to feel it just a little bit deeper into what was going on. Of course, I was growing up and I was finding out that everything that one learns in school is not what they say it is--even some of the books that you read, we used to read in school. So I got a little more active at reading between the lines. I guess when I became 28 I became a little bit more knowledgeable.

C: In your opinion, how has the Mexican American always been represented in governmental affairs? Has he always had an equal voice or been oppressed?

A: I have to answer that in that there has never really been representation for the Mexican American. We have had numerous electeds in various higher offices, even local and state offices, but so few, very few; it was still hard, very hard, to make a dent in the wall. Perhaps at this we are getting a little better treatment, but not really what you would call equality or justice. There has never been that, never. I don't care where you go in the U.S., I have seen it and it is the

same everywhere I go. We always get second best, yet we work twice as hard, doubly hard, because we learn Spanish, we learn English, we learn to speak it, read it, write it. And whenever the Anglo gets stuck the Chicano keeps on going, because he can always go into the other language. We have always been working doubly as hard. But in my years as a union representative I have always said that I think I should be making more money than that Anglo because I speak two languages, I can do more work and actually end up doing more work. The union stands for representation, to represent; so I always said, "If you all believe in representation, how about recognizing my needs?" If they would say something, I would just let it slide, I would play dumb. I always wound up doing a better job than the other guy. And that was satisfaction. I never really let it bother me.

C: Mr. Anchondo, did you ever hear any Anglo use the term Chicano?

A: It was always the word Mexican. There was a tone about it. It was not just Mexican, it was "Hey, Mexican." They used to put a something in it that made you just want to get up and do something about it. Just like the type of look when you went to a school and you went to the games and you wanted to root for your side. It wasn't a common word for the Anglo, it was always Mexican.

C: So the term Mexican American was used primarily among the Mexican Americans themselves?

A: That's right.

C: Now, with all that you have seen, all that you have experienced, the plight of the Chicano, to what point would you say we have progressed, if we have progressed? Where have we come, in your eyes?

A: I honestly feel that the Chicano has not gotten to where he should be. We have had more, I feel, scholars or people recognized as a race, we have had more people recognized for more achievements, yet we have not really been given the opportunity, the full opportunity or recognition for a lot of the things that we do. So as long as the willingness and the equality is not recognized it will be many, many years before we can say, "Well, we were recognized for doing something good." So that in saying, "Where are we now?"--let us use the figure from 1 to ten. I think that we have come up two notches. That's how far, because I have seen with my own eyes, and I have worked as a top official for labor unions, and a lot of times they pick not for what you know or your capabilities, but more as a token. They want to say, "I have a Chicano in my staff." So long as they follow theory, you will never really pick up that Chicano that is really aggressive, that Chicano that knows more, that is not a token, that is really himself, so that he will show his capabilities. Now when they start changing that around, I think that we can take a very giant step, a very giant step, because we have a lot of them waiting, waiting just to be given that recognition, to have that man come in and say, "Okay, here it is, get with it. Show me." And he'll show him. But as long as they come along and pick up any Tom, Dick or Harry, as the saying goes, just to say, "I have a Chicano, one of my best friends is a Chicano..."

C: Just to wrap this up, are you politically involved at this time?

A: Very much so, yes. I am running for the position of County Commissioner Precinct 2, in El Paso, Texas.

C: Well, Mr. Anchondo, I would like to say on behalf of myself and the

Institute of Oral History, thank you for giving us your time, and we won't forget you.

A: Thank you.