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Interview no. 496

Anonymous

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Anonymous

INTERVIEWER: Wendy Thomason

PROJECT: Class Project

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 17, 1978

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TAPE NO.: _____

TRANSCRIPT NO.: 496

TRANSCRIBER: Wendy S. Thomason

DATE TRANSCRIBED: April 23, 1978

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

El Paso businessman and musician

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Childhood experiences as a street vendor; discrimination; smuggling activities and his stay in prison; opinion on undocumented workers. (Also included are the lyrics to some Mexican songs.)

Length of Interview: _____ Length of Transcript: 11 pages

Anonymous
by Wendy S. Thomason
March 17, 1978

T: Sir, where and when were you born?

A: I was born in Juárez, Mexico on the third of November, 1949.

T: What was your father's occupation?

A: He was a bootmaker.

T: What was your family's size?

A: There were five boys and four girls, and my mom and dad?

T: Where did you grow up?

A: I grew up in El Paso and Juárez.

T: How old were you when you moved?

A: I was 12 years old.

T: Do you remember any significant or interesting events during your childhood?

A: Yes, I do. The most significant thing during my childhood, actually I never really did have a childhood, like what they call here in the United States. I used to go out and peddle things, and shoe shine, and sell candy. I've always been a salesman ever since I was very young, about six or seven years old.

T: What kind of things did you sell?

A: I sold candy, I sold lots of products like little dogs and candy, gum, and all kinds of things like little kids still do over in the Juárez area.

T: Did you make much money at it?

A: Not really. I used to make about equivalent to 50 cents a day, or something like that, for a whole day's work, which was about six pesos then.

T: Did it seem like a lot of you, since you were so small?

A: Well, it did. It was all right; otherwise, I guess I would have gone to something else. I used to make enough money to eat, to spend it on

candy or whatever I wanted to do. But most of that money used to go to my mother. I used to spend a very small portion of it.

T: Do you remember any incidents, like funny things happening, or sad things, from when you were a child selling things?

A: When you're out on the streets over there, it's similar to the law of the jungle. It's only the strong survives over there, and you really learn to take care of yourself as a kid. You don't let anybody run over you, because if you do, then everybody is gonna run over you. I really can't tell you if that's a funny or sad thing about it, because I learned a lot of things, and I don't regret anything I did then. I knew how to take care of myself, I knew how to make a living. When I was 10 years old I already knew exactly what to do to make a living. About the sad things that happened to me, a lot of grownups would try to take advantage of most of us little kids. For example, one particular incident that I'll never forget. It was one time that I was eating a sandwich by a store, and then there was this big guy with a large container with water, passed by, said, "Move away from me, I'm coming in," and he hit me very, very hard in my head. I remember it was hurting so much. But I got even with him, too. He had a truck that was selling mineral water or something like that. It was purified water, and one afternoon when I was waiting for him right below a hill where I used to live, I must have busted about 12 of those gallons. I had to get even with him because that was my way of living. That guy must have hunted me for about a year and a half, but he never caught up with me.

T: Where and when did you attend school?

A: Okay, I started school when I was about seven years old, in Juárez.

And then, I went up to about the fourth grade, and I flunked the fourth grade, because I was too busy with my extracurricular activities, or you could say my work on the outside, and I really didn't have too much time to study, or I never really did study. After my family moved into the United States, I went to school here. About the first three or four years of school here, I didn't learn anything, or any English, or nothing. I couldn't make anything out of it, until I got to about freshman in high school, I started taking an interest. Still, it was pretty hard. But most of my English was learned when I was in the Air Force. When I went into the Air Force, I went to a special school. I was sent to a special school to learn English, and that was where most of my English was learned. That's about the extent of my school during those times.

T: Aside from the languages, were there any differences between the Mexican schools and the American schools?

A: Yes, there sure was. It seems to me like the American Schools are more lenient toward education. I remember when I was in the Mexican schools, they were so strict in everything they did--the formal tests, the way the class was conducted. Actually, when I was in the first grade, I started to add, multiply; second grade, I was doing algebra. When I came to into the U.S., you didn't start doing algebra until you were in the eighth grade, I believe. So, I was very, very advanced when it came to mathematics when I came into the American schools. Of course, I didn't know English, History, or Biology, because I didn't know what the heck was going on.

T: How did it affect you personally? How did the sudden changes in the

school and everything make you feel?

A: I felt very infuriated. As a matter of fact, I always used to tell my dad, why did he take me out of Mexico, because my very first, second and third grade over there, I was a straight A student; and all of a sudden I come over here and I just flunk everything. The fourth grade, I didn't take too much interest in school 'cause I was too much involved in working on the outside, but if I wanted to I could get real good grades over there. I was a good student over there. The main thing, I didn't have too much interest from my parent's side, for me to go ahead on my education. As a matter of fact, they wanted me to quit school when I was that age, but I insisted on going to school.

T: Were there any significant or interesting events that stand out in your memory from the schools?

A: No, not really. Actually, the only significant thing that stands out in my memory, when I was in grade school, I used to have an instructor named Mrs. Pitchman, and she really took an interest in me. I really appreciate that woman. I understand she's one of the high officials in the Ysleta district now, and she's one of my most significant things in my life, when it comes to schools.

T: What social activities in school were you involved in?

A: I really don't know if they're social activities or not, but I was involved in nothing but working programs, like the N.Y.C. and DECA, and things that would bring me an income. That's about it.

T: Did the schools have cultural activities?

A: I really couldn't tell you, because I wasn't involved in it at all. I just wanted to have some income. When I was in high school, for example,

I had three jobs. I had the paper route during the morning time, then at noon I used to work two and a half hours a day for the N.Y.C. selling cokes, and after school I used to work at the airport refueling aircraft. So I was pretty busy guy and I didn't have time for anything.

T: Were you involved in any of the school's recreational activities?

A: During my freshman year, I did. I ran track, high jumped, played football. But, my parents' economical status forced me into quitting that and go to work instead, because they couldn't afford nine kids and an income of about \$70 a month.

T: Did you date much in high school?

A: Not really. I must have had about two girlfriends, that's about it, for the same reason again that I didn't have time. I was so busy trying to make a living. I enjoyed my high school years, of course, in school, but after school it was just work. I didn't have time to date much.

T: When you did date, what type of girl was it usually that you would pick?

A: It was a home-like girl. I didn't like wild girls at all. I like nice, quiet type of girl. Oh, I take it back. I must have had about three girlfriends in high school. I just like a quiet type of girl that goes to church most of the time. Of course, I never did go to church myself, but that would indicate a lot to me.

T: Where did you go on a typical date?

A: Usually to have a hamburger or something like that. Very seldom, I had the opportunity to go to a drive-in or something with one of them. Probably I went with a girl to the drive-in, but I never really had time. I used to work seven days a week.

T: What was your first job?

A: I used to sell candy, and that was about my very first job.

T: What kind of jobs did you get after graduation from high school?

A: Actually, I had my better jobs when I was in high school with DECA.

I worked for a filling station, and then I went out to work at the airport as a refueler. From there, I went out to work as an aircraft mechanic helper. It was a pretty nice job, of course you can't advance much. I always thought to get a better job, and I wasn't going to wait and sit down for somebody to offer it to me. I was always after a better job.

T: Were you ever a victim of ethnic discrimination in your job experiences?

A: Yes. It was a constant thing. A lot of guys couldn't see it. I guess you could say that I never let anybody put me down, a radical. When I was in the Air Force I was called radical a couple of times, but in my job experiences right after high school it was the same. But one main incident that I remember of discrimination against me, it was one time when I was with my girlfriend, which became my wife later, my girlfriend's father came out. She was a white girl, and he came out there and he told me that he never gave a Mexican permission to sit in his yard. I was really hurt. So, the only thing I could do was just grab him by the neck and tell him next time he said it I was going to bust his mouth. That's how I got my temper off of him. But that's one of the ones that I really remember a lot.

T: Was there any other incidents that you can remember?

A: Yeah, another incident that just came to me. It was one time when I was a junior in high school. It was a junior or sophomore in high school, I really don't remember exactly. There was a real good friend of mine named Julio, and Benny, and me. Benny was a very smart guy, and Julio

was a smart guy, too. Hell, you know, I was behind them all the way.

We went over to apply for the F.B.I. I remember we went into the Federal Bureau of Investigation building in downtown El Paso and, I remember the only guy they wanted to talk to was Benny. I felt so hurt, man. Benny noticed it and said, "You guys can go in, too." So I was really, really hurt that day because the only guy they talked to was Benny. They didn't even talk to me. They said a few words to Julio, but Benny was the main thing there. Benny was a white guy that used to hang around with us all the time. That's about the only thing.

T: Tell me about the business you're involved in now.

A: Well, I have a car lot, and I have two trailer courts, and I try to manage them. I do pretty well on them. I don't make a lot of money, but I do good enough to make money to party with. It's not a bad business, I just have to work pretty hard.

T: What led to your involvement in them?

A: Well, my main concern was because I wanted to be self-supporting. I didn't want to work for anybody. For the same purpose that I am a radical. I'm not really a radical, but people think I am because I don't like people running over me. I have been run over too much. The only way I was gonna make it was by making it on my own. That's what I'm doing right now. I work hard, and I try to make it on my own.

T: Do you have any interesting anecdotes that have happened concerning them?

A: No, not really. Yes, yes I do. As a matter of fact, I do, Wendy. When I first bought this business, here on Dyer, I was working on the front part of the business. I was trying to get it ready for a car lot. The

border patrol came over here and asked me what my name was, and I played the game all the way. I told them I didn't speak English. So they asked to speak to the manager. My manager, Charlie, was back here and I told them, "There's the manager over there." The guy was a Mexican guy. He didn't even try to speak Spanish to me. He didn't ask who was the owner, they asked where was the manager. So I told them, "Go over there and talk to the manager." So they went over and talked to the manager 'cause I think they thought I was a wetback, 'cause I had a hat on, and I was working with a pick and a shovel in the front. They went over there to talk to Charlie and they asked Charlie who was the owner. Charlie told them, "That's the owner over there in the front." The guy seemed puzzled. He couldn't even picture me being the owner of this place. After a while, I proved that I was the owner. They just left me alone.

T: How has the Chicano Movement affected you?

A: Wendy, the Chicano Movement unfortunately I'm not acquainted with. I really don't know what their main purpose is. When the movement was very hard I was overseas and I really don't know. I've never been really involved with them, so I really don't know the Chicano Movement.

T: Did the peso devaluation of 1976 have any affect on you?

A: Yes, it did, Wendy. It had a great affect on me. Shocked the hell out of me. I was in prison then. But not really. I was on vacation so it really didn't make a difference to me.

T: Where did you spend your vacation?

A: I was in the farm, in the federal joint.

T: In La Tuna?

A: Yeah, part of it was there.

T: How long were you there?

A: I was just there for a few months.

T: Why?

A: It all goes back to the money purpose again. I was in an illegal business, the importation of illegal stuff into the U.S.

T: Can you think of any interesting things that happened to you while you were importing illegal things?

A: Well, I don't know if they're interesting. They're risky as hell. About the only interesting thing that happens to you when you're in that kind of business is just that every narc in El Paso wants to bust you, and all over the U.S. There's nothing interesting about it. It's just the good money that comes in once in a while.

T: How did you bring goods across the border?

A: There's several ways: by car, by truck or by plane.

T: And you used all three?

A: I'd rather not discuss that.

T: Can you tell me anything about what life was like in La Tuna?

A: Yes, I can. Life inside there is just a completely different world. It's a world of your own. You make life in there. You just have to get used to it and it's just like any other place, with the exception of women in there.

T: When did you and your family move to El Paso?

A: It was around 1962. I'm not sure exactly.

T: Why did you come here?

A: It was probably for economical reasons. My dad first immigrated, and

then the whole family did about a year later.

T: Did you have any problems getting papers?

A: No, because my dad was already in the states.

T: What were your first impressions of El Paso?

A: It was too quiet for me.

T: Was it noisy in Juárez?

A: There was a lot of action going on, all the time.

T: Did you have any problems in settling down here?

A: No, not really. We first moved into an apartment over there by Chihuahua Street, and then about a year later my dad bought a house on La Paz. That was Hacienda Heights area.

T: How did you go about becoming an American citizen?

A: When I reached the age of 18 I went and applied for it, and I took a test. I passed it. Two or three months later I swore myself in to be an American citizen.

T: When was the first time you heard the word Chicano?

A: It was when we moved into El Paso.

T: What did it mean to you?

A: I really didn't know what it was.

T: How do you feel about the use of the word now?

A: Everybody to their own thing. I know I'm a Mexican, lock, stock, and barrel.

T: What's your opinion of the Chicano Movement?

A: Like I told you before, I really don't understand. I don't know what the heck it is.

T: What's your opinion of illegal aliens?

A: I don't have anything against them. They're trying to better themselves. If they're like me, when I want something, I get it one way or the other, so let them do what they want.

T: Do you have any interesting hobbies that relate to the border?

A: Yes. I like to play the guitar and sing. I do a lot of singing with the mariachis. That's another fact. I'm organizing a mariachi tour to states, and it's in progress right now.

T: Do you have any other business ventures pending that relate to the border?

A: Yes. Right now I'm in the process of negotiating a deal with Pemex. I'm trying to get this American company to do some drilling for Pemex and it's in the process of maturing right now. But I really don't like to count my chickens before they hatch. But I know it probably isn't going to go through.

- A. I might as well tell you now, Wendy, that my favorite type of music is the ranchera romantic music. I know a couple of songs and I'm going to play you some coplas. That's what they call in Spanish a series of songs. I hope it comes out good. The very first one I'm going to play you is Crei. It's a very popular Mexican song. I don't remember who the writer was, but it's very beautiful.

Creí, que tu vida era mía
 Y que tú, me quería
 Como yo te quiero a tí
 Cante' a lucción de mi
 Yo te doy mi vivir
 Despues mi canción se so triste
 Llore' cuando ya te perdí
 Creí, mi amor, que tu vida era mía
 Y que tú, me quería
 Como yo te quiero a tí.

The next songs are going to be Reloj and then I'm going to try to do a couple of rancheras, real nice romantic ones.

Reloj no marques las horas
 Porque voy a enloquecer
 Ella se irá para siempre

Cuando amanezca otra vez
Nomás nos queda esta noche
Para vivir nuestro amor
Y tu tic toc me recuerda
Mi inolvidable dolor
Reloj deten tu camino
Haz esta noche perpetua
Para que nunca se vaya de mí
Para que nunca amanezca
Ella es la estrella
Que alumbra mi ser
Yo sin su amor no soy nada.

Una de Agustín Ramírez muy bonita.

Paloma, déjame ir
Quiero encontrarte dormida
A la noche que vuelvas
Ya sabes pa' que
Ya estate quieta paloma
Ya estate quieta cariño
Que el sol por la
Mañana ya amaneció
Paloma, déjame ir
No me preguntas que si te quiero

Que tú no sabes que por tí me muero
Y que tu brazos poden de mi
Paloma, déjame ir
Abre tus alas paloma
A la noche que vuelvas
Ya sabes pa' que
Ya estate quieta paloma
Ya estate quieta cariño
Que el sol por la mañana
Ya obscuresió.

Las próximas canciones van a ser interpretación de José
Alfredo Jiménez y voy a tratar de cantar las todas un
bastante largas y así es que va a ver algunas cortas.
La primera es una muy bonita que se llama El Hijo Del
Pueblo.

Es mi orgullo ser del
Barrio más humilde
Alejado del Bullicio
De la falsa sociedad
Yo no tuve la desgracia
De no ser hijo del pueblo
Yo me encuentro
Entre la gente que
No tiene falsedad

Mi destino es muy parejo
Yo lo quiero como venga
Soportando una trizteza
O detrás de una ilusión
Voy camino de la vida
Muy feliz con mi pobreza
Como no tengo dinero
Tengo mucho corazon.

Una canción muy bonita también de José Alfredo Jiménez que
es una de mis favoritas. Ya por título Muchacha Bonita.

Muchacha bonita, bonita bonita
Con toda las fuerzas que tengo en el alma
Con toda mi vida
Te voy a adorar
Muchacha bonita, bonita bonita
En toda las noches que duermo
Te juro que siempre te voy a soñar
Te quiero y me quiere
Te extraño y me extraña
Y sé que cuando andas solita
Le pides al cielo
Volverme a mi admirar

Por eso te quiero
Muchacha bonita
Por eso ante Dios
Te prometo que nunca te voy a olvidar
Te quiero y me quiere
Te extraño y me extraña
Y sé que cuando andas solita
Le pides al cielo
Volverme a mi admirar
Por eso te quiero
Muchacha bonita
Por eso ante Dios
Te prometo que nunca te voy a olvidar.

Otra que lleva por nombre . . . Fue la última de José Alfredo
o se puede decir una de las últimas de José Alfredo cuando
le da gracias al mundo por haber escuchado todas sus
canciones, y también lleva por título Gracias.

Como puedo pagar
Que me quieran a mí
Por todas mis canciones
Ya me puse a pensar
Y no alcanzo a cubrir
Tan lindas intenciones

He ganado dinero
Para comprar un mundo
Más bonita que el nuestro
Pero todo lo aviento
Porque quiero morirme
Como muere mi pueblo
Yo no quiero saber
Que se siente tener
Millones y millones
Si tuviera conque
Compraría para mí
Otros dos corazones
Para hacerlos vibrar
Y llenar otra vez
Sus almas de ilusiones
Y poderles pagar
Que me quieran a mí
Ya todas mis canciones.
De veras, muchas gracias
Por haberme aguantado tanto tiempo
Desde mil novecientos cuarenta nueve
Hasta hoy
Yo siento que todavía me quieren
Saben porque
Porque yo he ganado más aplausos que dinero
El dinero, pues no sé mi pordonde lo tiré

Pero sus aplausos
Esos los traigo aquí a dentro
Y no me los quita nadie
Esos se van conmigo
Hasta la muerte
Para poderles pagar
Que me quieran a mí
Ya todas mis canciones.

That's about it, Wendy. I'm getting a little tired, a
little scratchy, but still alive.