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Interview no. 554

Ed Quinn

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Quinn, Ed
INTERVIEWER: Oscar Martinez
PROJECT: _____
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

General Manager Radio KEPS/KINL, Eagle Pass, Texas; 52 years of age.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Experiences as a management person in a twin plant; views on life in Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras; Spanish language radio on the border.

Length of Interview: 45 minutes Length of Transcript: 16 pages

Ed Quinn
by Oscar Martinez
November 1, 1977

M: First, could you tell me where you're from, Mr. Quinn?

Q: I was born and raised in New Jersey, the northern part of New Jersey, right across from Manhattan -- in Montclair, New Jersey. The way I finally arrived at Eagle Pass, Texas, was that I migrated to Memphis, Tennessee, where I took employment with an electronics firm. I was later transferred to open a twin plant, industrial electronics plant, on the border of Mexico and Eagle Pass. Piedras Negras is where we started the plant some 11 years ago. I was the first American here to open the plant.

M: Oh, you were the first one?

Q: Yes, and it was unique, inasmuch as I was here a month before the plant opened and I interviewed the first 50 girls, some of which after 11 years are still employed at the plant. We had 1,600 girls and we're the largest television tuner plant in the world, in Piedras Negras.

M: How many people employed there?

Q: Now, unfortunately, they're down to about 250 because they've expanded their Mexican operations and they found more of a labor market in the interior of Mexico. They've got a plant now in Zaragoza, which is about 40 miles west of Piedras Negras, and another one at Allende, which is also about 40 miles west. But understandably, they just had a new contract signed with Zenith Corporation, and they will be expanding this plant back up again, not to 1,600, but to perhaps 1,000 people. So, the electronics the corporation is very happy with the operation in Mexico. But I saw it grow from a thought to really a big industrial plant. The labor in Mexico is just outstanding. We had girls working with us that were 16 years of age that came in off the street and had never seen a piece of electronic equipment

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before, and they adapted to it very rapidly. Much more so than many of the newcomers in the United States.

M: You came here in 1970?

Q: I came here in 1968.

M: In setting up this plant, did you run into any problems since that kind of industry was so new here in Piedras Negras/ Eagle Pass?

Q: What kind of problems?

M: Well, with customers, or officials on the other side or officials here, since you had to transport raw materials from the United States and components and so forth.

Q: Not at all. In fact, when we first went to Mexico it was just absolutely amazing the cooperation we received from the Mexican authorities in the aduana. In fact, a humorous point that I can bring on is when I... oh, just the first couple of weeks here, the company shipped me some equipment which I received here in Eagle Pass and I put it in the back of my pick-up truck one Saturday morning. And I left the motel and drove uptown, Eagle Pass, and got a haircut and got a bite to eat. And without thinking, I drove across the bridge. And it wasn't until I got to the other side, and I discovered all this equipment in the back of the truck. No papers, nothing. And normally they would've sent me back to the United States. But the man that was on duty at the time in command understood my plight, that it was incoming equipment for the start of this new plant, and he let me pass. It wasn't anything sophisticated. It was just minor things maintenance-wise, and he let me pass. But we got tremendous cooperation from the Mexican government when we first started the plant.

M: What was your experience there at that plant?

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Q: Concerning what?

M: Well, the growth of the plant and your position there in working with the Mexican labor. One question that I have about that is whether the Mexican labor was union labor or non-union.

Q: Well, it was union, inasmuch as it was union run by the girls, by the employees.

M: Did they belong to a big federal union?

Q: No. It was a union that they started within themselves in the plant. They received help and advice from other unions and people that had worked in the unions in Mexico. No, and it wasn't a company union. You know, in the United States you hear of company unions, but it was a union. The union representatives were elected from the rank and file of the workers there.

My job in the plant, when I was sent down here, and understandably so, was as a supervisor instructor. Mexico, and once again, understandably so, wouldn't want professional help to be shipped into Mexico to where all of the supervisory staff would be United States citizens. So I was sent in with the expressed purpose of training the people that would be working under me, so that eventually one day they could take up my duties. Perhaps my closest friend is a young Mexican lad, Fernando Rodriguez. He was a very talented person, and he learned everything that I taught him and learned it extremely well--from welding right on down to taking sophisticated pieces of machinery apart and repairing it. One step further on him, I heard a report the other day that they are going to send him now to Bloomington, Indiana, for further training, and at the conclusion of the three-month training period he will return to Mexico as one of the key personnel, perhaps making from \$16,000 to \$20,000 dollars a year. To me, that in

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itself is tremendous for us having been here, that we have taught people the task of carrying on the electronic business.

M: How long were you at that plant?

Q: I was there close to 11 years, and I saw it grow from 50 girls originally to 1,600 girls. And then, the main reason I left was that with the deployment of these two plants in the interior...

M: They closed down two plants?

Q: No. The advent of it...we started up two plants in the interior. But this time, my assistant, Fernando Rodriguez, was so adept at the job that I taught him to do that I found that I was working less and less and needed less and less. And my parent company made overtures that they were gonna send me to Taiwan, Formosa. In the meantime I had been doing some news-casting on this radio station part-time. I was offered a position, and I gave it much consideration, and consequently left that company to stay here in Eagle Pass--and primarily because I love the border, I love Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass.

M: When you first came here, coming to such a small place compared to where you had been before, what were your initial impressions?

Q: Well, of course, I've loved the small town ever since I left my native New Jersey and I have lived in towns in Mississippi that had maybe a population of 300. So I'm used to small towns.

M: But this is a different kind of small town.

Q: Well, it was a different twin small town.

M: Right.

Q: Of course, I was all agog and wide-eyed when I first went to Mexico. First time I'd ever been to Mexico, of course, is when I crossed to Piedras Negras. And I was extremely impressed because I had dinner at the Moderno Restaurant, which is quite a landmark in Piedras Negras. But the people

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I worked with--and I didn't know one word of Spanish when I crossed the bridge that first day, I didn't know how to say buenos días--but I found out that I don't care whether you're in a small town, large town, or whatever, you can get along. You don't necessarily have to be fluent in the language, you get along. And I was also impressed with the amount of historical values there are to this section of the country. And I've read up about it how the Indian trails used to come through here and how they had a lot of renegades, and many of the wagon trains would stop here at Fort Duncan Park.

Incidentally, my good friend that I mentioned, Fernando Rodriguez, he's well knowledgeable in the past history of Piedras Negras. We were out fishing [one day] and he took me to a spot in Piedras Negras, which was the original Piedras Negras, before they moved to the bluff of the Rio Grande. And the original Piedras Negras was on the banks of the San Antonio River, which is just west of Piedras Negras. And he showed me buried ovens that the Indians used to cook on back many, many, many years ago. And [there are] still a lot of artifacts laying around on the ground. And this is land that his father and his family owned and come to own. So Fernando Rodriguez he knows this country just like you wouldn't believe. He has a tremendous depth of knowledge of Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass.

M: KEPS is a Spanish language station.

Q: Yes.

M: How big is your audience?

Q: Well, I would say that on the most recent survey taken, for all the Spanish-speaking stations in this area...and you'll see there are quite a few of them in Piedras Negras. Three of them that are on the survey: one in

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Zaragoza, Sabinas, Rosita, and Musquis. KEPS in May of 1977 was declared to hold a 31 percent command of the audience. Our KEPS affiliate broadcasts from sunup to sundown. Our KINL, which is the FM, broadcasts from six o'clock in the morning till ten o'clock at night, with authorization to broadcast 24 hours a day, which we do when we set up a weather watch if we have severe weather. We keep KINL FM on the air to keep people posted to the weather conditions. In fact, there have been quite a few times that I've gotten up at two, three o'clock in the morning, and with very bad weather conditions come out and open up the station again. And with that audience we covered all of northern Mexico, that is down to Zaragoza. We got lots of listeners in all of northern Mexico. And we extend up to close to Del Rio, all of the country, and up to Uvalde, La Prior, Carrizo Springs, Crystal City. Quite an area.

M: This audience that was surveyed here is the total listening audience in the area?

Q: Yes. And this was done by an independent Mexican survey, not the United States or a U.S. survey come down here. Oh, it's possibly been three or four years ago. And they did the survey on the FM station. They showed that the FM KINL commanded 34 percent of the listening audience. Now, that's taking into consideration that we also have San Antonio stations coming in here. So we're truly the voice of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras. We have perhaps the largest local news audience in the area.

M: Is there any significant difference between your Spanish language station and your English language station?

Q: No, there isn't. For a long time, this radio station just had the AM KEPS. And the need of the people, or the desire of the people wanting an FM

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station prompted us to initiate an FM station for a little easier listening music, if you please. But before that time, we were English on KEPS from six o'clock in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon, and then Spanish from one o'clock in the afternoon to sign-off. And when we decided to go 100 percent Spanish on KEPS, our business tripled.

M: Really?

Q: Yes.

M: A lot of advertising from Piedras Negras?

Q: Lots of advertising from Piedras Negras and, of course, the merchants in Eagle Pass. It's unique. They broadcast in Spanish on KEPS because most of this listening audience is... this survey is done in Piedras Negras, not for Eagle Pass. So, you can go throughout the neighborhoods in Piedras Negras, and if you hear a radio, chances are you'll hear it tuned to KEPS. There are a log of good radio stations in Piedras Negras and in Zaragoza, Rosita, but KEPS has had tremendous following here. We do an awful lot of public service work here--announcements of what's going on politically, what's going on healthwise, what's going on, /in the/ welfare office, social security. And there a lot of people living in Piedras Negras that are welfare recipients and social security recipients living in Mexico. People that might've lived here for a long time became eligible and then they just happened to return to their native Piedras Negras to live. But they're still on the welfare and social security rolls.

M: Speaking of politics, how do Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans here interact politically?

Q: Well, Doctor, you know, people have asked me this and they say, "Are there any racial tensions?" No, there's not. And in other communities where

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they say, "Well, we want more Mexican Americans on the board." Quite often, in fact right now, the entire city commission are all Mexican American, which is fine. But there's no racial tensions here. If a person is doing a good job, regardless of his past, he's accepted. If he's not doing a good job, he's not accepted by either the Anglo or the Mexican American factions. And it's that simple. I think that's one reason that makes it so pleasant to live here. It's not a case of, "Well, he's on there and he's an Anglo, we want him out", or "He's a Mexican, we want him out." It's really on the merit of the people. And, of course, it's 96 percent Mexican American here, four percent Anglo.

M: Oh really? That high?

Q: [Yes.] But no racial tensions in the school. That is, per se. Now, you might have a fight out on the school ground between an Anglo and Mexican youngster, but it's not because of racial tones, it's because one of them stepped on somebody else's toes. And that makes it very pleasant. No, there's no racial tension down here. I think I mentioned to you the other day that I wouldn't have a qualm in the world of allowing my wife and my children to venture across the bridge into Piedras Negras shopping at ten o'clock Saturday night, with no fear whatever, because of the small town atmosphere between the two cities. I've seen people that had been drinking too much in Piedras Negras, and the lack of uniformed, gun-carrying police in Piedras Negras make you wonder, well, you know, they don't have a law. But if anyone gets out of hand and perhaps gets boisterous, I've seen Mexican citizens, maybe two men'll come along and they just take 'em. Not rough-arm stuff, but just help 'em to maybe the police station or wherever, you know, to get 'em off the streets so there wouldn't be a

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public disturbance. So, the feeling between the two cities is like one really. If you cemented the Rio Grande and painted it green, it would be like one town. That's what I like about Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass.

And I've got some tremendously warm friends with a long lasting friendship in Piedras Negras. I was padrino for 15 girls while I was there, stood up at their weddings and watched their first youngsters born and brought into the world, padrino for the youngsters. I guess, more than most people, I have been inside Mexico truly in the Mexican tradition, in the homes, than anyone else I can think of. Tourists wouldn't go where I have had the opportunity of going--that is, to the homes of the people that I worked with over there. And I found out one thing: the Mexican people know immediately whether they like you or don't like you. If a person is putting on a false front, they can spot you in a minute. I know that for sure here in Piedras Negras; I can't answer for the other places. But they can spot a phony in a minute. And there're just good relationships between Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass.

M: Not too far from here is a town that receives a lot of publicity, Crystal City. I wonder if there's been any fallout to this area from Crystal City about some of the things that have gone on there.

Q: No, no. I don't think so. I think the majority of the people here feel pretty much the same way that Crystal City's problem is Crystal City. And Del Rio has their problems, Uvalde has their problems. You might have some people here that have relatives over there that will feel badly for them. But no, we haven't had any inter-feeling to speak of. In fact, I was in Crystal City the morning they shut the gas valves off.

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M: Oh, really?

Q: With our Mexican news announcer. And in fact, we interviewed one of the city councilmen first that morning, before any of the San Antonio stations got to 'em. I mean, we asked the first questions, and there was a very... I thought perhaps there'd be more show of an anger condition, but there wasn't. I think truly Mexican people are not as alarmed at what happens. And I don't know how I can relate that to you. In Mexico itself, the people are passive. And if something happens, I don't say they ignore it, but they face it that que será, será, you know. When the flood ravaged this place in 1954, the flood was 19 feet deep, the waters in Piedras Negras. And they went on about their business, and did the best they could. And then when the flood waters receded, they moved back in and built up. Of course, you see that all around the world, on earthquakes and what not. But you and I perhaps would be in a state of shock for a month, but here it's a case that everybody takes things as they come. I'm sorry for Crystal City, but you know, that's their problems, we got our problems. Maybe something will happen.

M: How is the problem in Crystal City explained here, or how do people in Eagle Pass see the origin of the problem in Crystal City?

Q: Okay. I had a lot of people here voice displeasure at the City Fathers up there for letting it go that far. They felt that when the City Fathers are not leading, then you get into a predicament like Crystal City is facing--that everything else is going up, but it's up to the city officials to take action then, rather than waiting over three or four years and then saying, "Hey! They're gonna chop us off." Well, a lot of the people up there, of course, they're being provided for. Not with the best, but I don't think anybody up there is going hungry and I hope they're not getting too cold. But I understand that Crystal City is having a big

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250,000 gallon butane drum put into the city that will feed butane into the homes that before had natural gas.

But the point still remains, Doctor, a personal reflection. All right, Crystal City had their problems. Don't blame the people of Crystal City, blame whoever. But if the city officials felt that the poor people of Crystal City couldn't afford the higher gas prices, and then Senator _____ turns around and sends them electric blankets, and electric stoves, and everything electric, the price of electric up there, electricity is almost prohibitive. If they can't afford that, how in heaven's name can they afford going all electric? I mean, it's like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. And everybody's facing it. Eagle Pass is facing it. We've got a lot of poor people here that can't afford /it/, but they do, they adjust, which I think is a key word to any situation. Adjust.

M: Do you have any interesting anecdotes in connection with your position in that twin plant, or anything else since you've lived here?

Q: The only thing that I can say that my one claim to fame is that when I was young I grew up with Italian people. We were the only Irish family in the entire community of Italians. When I was eight years old, I learned to eat Italian cherry peppers--been eating them all my life. And when I all the time worked in Piedras Negras, my claim to fame was that all of my compadres that worked in the plant bragged on me that I could eat more jalapeños than any Mexican in Piedras Negras. And lots of times they'd put me the test and I would eat as many as 37 jalapeños at one sitting.

M: Really?

Q: And /it/ never bothers me because I'm used to it.

M: The real hot ones?

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Q: Oh, yeah, extremely hot. And people used to come in off the streets, you know, and make a big deal about it.

M: "Come see the show!"

Q: Well, you know, I fee good about it, because I was accepted. A lot of people over there used to call me pingo gringo. I was like the devil, you know, I kidded with everybody and we got along real good. I had lots of names, muñeco and papucho and many, many other names. But they always talked about how the gringo could eat the hot peppers better than anybody else in Mexico. It was a lot of fun and I didn't do it to show off, because I still eat peppers on this side of the river. I'm addicted to them, I guess. But they never bother me. I eat two or three chiles verdes everyday, in my home. But they just couldn't get over it, because most times an Anglo went to Mexico and they were deathly afraid of hot peppers, you know.

We had one man come down from New York City. He was an investigator, checking into our plant one day--security--and he wanted to search all the girls as they were leaving, which was ridiculous. But that evening he wanted to be aloof and he wanted to be so cool that he went out to the Moderno to eat by himself. And as is the custom in Mexico, of course, you know, when you go in a restaurant and sit down, they'll take your order and then another person will bring you the water and the silverware, and another waiter will come along and bring you bread and a bowl of chile. Well, this know-it-all New Yorker sat down and ordered and they in turn brought him the bread and the water and the silverware, and they brought him the little bowl of chile. And bless his heart, he thought it was a

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bowl of consomé, and that was the first course of his meal, and it was dark in the restaurant. And he salt and peppered that dude and he took a big spoonful of that. And I'll tell you what, he really come out of it. Now, it hurt him, but he took a big spoonful of that piping hot chile, and he swallowed it before he realized what he had gotten into. And to me that's amazing. It's also amazing, we've had a lot of people come down here, they've brought their own soap powders, they brought their own food, they brought their own jug of water. And Piedras Negras has a three million dollar water purification plant. The water in Piedras Negras is purer than the water in Eagle Pass. Now, if you go in the interior, naturally if you get to a place where they got a shallow well, yes, I'd be a little skeptical about drinking the water. But Piedras Negras has a tremendously modern water purification plant. And there's a lot of technology in Piedras Negras, a lot of good people there that had been educated in the United States and returned to Piedras Negras to help the progress of their people.

M: Any other anecdote that you can think of, or any jokes that have to do with the region?

Q: Any jokes? Oh, Chihuahua! I've had a thousand jokes and I've always had problems in Mexico of translating a joke or an anecdote into Spanish. And one that I tried one day is, I shook hands one morning with one of the girls that was working out on the line, and she had cold hands. And the old saying in the United States that I've remembered all of my life is, you know: Cold hands, warm heart; dirty feet, no sweetheart. You try to translate that into Spanish and it absolutely makes no sense whatsoever. Manos de frío, corazón caliente; sucio, poco caliente corazón. And they'd say, "Qué, qué, qué, qué?" So you know, it absolutely makes no sense.

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M: It just doesn't work.

Q: No, it doesn't. And translating a joke that we know here over there, and as far as those jokes over there, it's a whole different ball game. We had internal jokes, things that we laughed about lots of times over there.

But summing it up, the only thing that I can say is that the feeling in Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras makes me want to stay here. In fact, I've discussed it with my wife and family and I don't think we'll ever leave Eagle Pass, unless driven out. And I don't foresee that, unless I make money--more editorials on the radio. But no, they're very warm-hearted people here, and that's what I like. And I like the climate. We have very little severe weather here. And I'm chicken. I cam from Mississippi where they had tornadoes every other day, and we've had good weather. And I could be questioned by saying that, because two years ago I was ravaged; my home was ravaged by a freak hail storm. One afternoon it struck just a little portion of our city, from Secomines right up to this area. No place else was touched. I had large lemon-size hail stones--just absolutely wiped out my home. So, freakish things do happen. It was a very bad week, it was a week that was... I had my home completely damaged, that was on Sunday. I turned 50 on Tuesday, and on Thursday of that week my son-in-law was driving me home and someone was looking at the storm damage doing about 60 miles an hour, rear-ended us and totaled out my brand new Caprice Chevrolet. So that was a terrible week. But other than that, I mean, we survived it fine.

M: Everything happens at once.

Q: Yeah. Comes in three's.

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M: Well, I wouldn't say turning 50 is so bad.

Q: Well, right now, you know, I'm 52 and people ask me, "Say, how old are you?" And I say I'm close to fifty. See, I don't tell them I'm on the other side of fifty. So, I'm just close to 50, and they think maybe it's 47 or 48. No, that never bothered me. I'm gonna grow old just as gracefully and graciously as I know. And I think being here is gonna help me, because I have no anxieties. I sleep well and have carne asada when I can and enjoy fishing with my friends still in Mexico. And I go over there quite a bit. I don't know what else I can tell you.

M: I think we covered most of what we wanted to ask you. We want to thank you very much.

Q: Well, I appreciate you coming in town, and any time. In fact, Alvaro Ruiz says on the radio, I'm perhaps one of the biggest boosters of this because I'm always talking about how beautiful it is here and how nice the people are. If I didn't mean it, I wouldn't say it. That's as simple as I can put it.

M: Thank you very much. Tell us about the first time they took you fishing out from town.

(P A U S E)

Q: Yeah. And I went on a fishing trip into a beautiful ranch owned by a very wealthy landowner here, the De los Santos Family of Piedras Negras. And I was used to goin' fishing and carrying my own bait and baiting my own hook and taking the fish off and cleaning the fish. And it was a caravan of trucks and all of our friends went, but I was the only Anglo. And, gosh, they put me in the boat the next day with two little kids with oars, and a man that was directing them, and they directed where the boat went and they let me cast. And I caught 88 fish in one

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hour, but I couldn't take the first fish off the line. And, "No, señor, no." And, you know, I'd reel it right up to the boat, and they'd take it off, wouldn't let me clean it, wouldn't let me bait it, nothing. Just to me, that was a washout. I wanted to get my hands dirty and fish they way I was used to fishing. But they're very proper people over there, and I thinkg they do things for people out of sincerity and from the heart in Piedras Negras. Can't say that I'm used, or will ever be used, to the easy living. But I'm giving it my best shot, you know.

Those people over there, the first time I went into the Customs House, at ten after nine, you know, and I was expecting, "Come on, I need some papers signed." "Sí, cállate." And they weren't ready. They had to read their morning paper because they didn't start till nine o'clock, you know. But you learn to live with that condition down here, that's what I like so much. I mean, it's not a case of procrastination or laziness, it's just that people don't rush too much. And that's what makes living along the border ideal. And you either love it or you despise it. Because I've got a lot of people, that I know that've despised it and left, would never come back. I've had people that have left despising it and then couldn't wait to come back. So you see, when they then get a taste of the other, they want to come back to the easy living.

Q: Well, I thank you very much.

M: Thank you.