

6-18-1979

## Interview no. 608

Mario Chamberlain

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Mario Chamberlain (1932 - )  
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez  
PROJECT: Border Labor History  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 18, 1979  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
  
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TRANSCRIBER: Irene Ramírez  
DATE TRANSCRIBED: March 3, 1982

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in Ohio in 1932.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Chief Supervisory Border Patrol Agent. Of Costa Rican-Anglo parentage; entry into Border Patrol; tracking down undocumented aliens in the desert; memorable unsuccessful chase of a Tarahumara Indian; his work in Nogales.

Length of Interview: 45 minutes      Length of Transcript: 17 pages

MARIO CHAMBERLAIN  
by Oscar J. Martínez  
July 18, 1979

M: First of all, Mr. Chamberlain, are you from this area originally?

C: No.

M: Where are you from, sir?

C: Well, raised in Louisiana.

M: Could you tell me when you were born, please, and where?

C: I was born in 1932. I was born in Ohio.

M: Oh, you were born in Ohio, I see. So you've moved around.

C: Yeah. My father was in the army.

M: How did you come to join the Border Patrol?

C: Oh, I just read something about it, and it sounded like something I wanted to do.

M: And could I ask you where you read about it? In the newspaper?

C: I can't remember, probably magazine articles. I think I even read some book about it--I can't remember the name--written about the '30s, which really didn't pertain to what it does now.

M: Did you go to school in Louisiana?

C: Yes.

M: When did you join the Border Patrol?

C: June 1, 1964.

M: And what type of training did you have to take?

C: I had to go at the academy, Border Patrol Academy, which at that time was in Port Isabel, Texas. And it was 16 weeks of Spanish, Immigration Law, Naturalization Law, and other related subjects like Firearms and First Aid, and Fingerprinting and record keeping, and things like that.

M: What was your first assignment in the Border Patrol? Where did they send you?

C: Right here.

M: Oh, right here to Nogales. Have you been an agent in other parts of the

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border, or is this the only place that you've worked?

C: This is the only place I've worked.

M: What did you think of Nogales when you first came here? I'm sure it must've been different for you.

C: Oh, I don't know if it was all that different, I've lived in a lot of small towns. This was just another small town. But I liked it. I thought the people were friendly and I made a lot of friends with the people around here. So I guess I just liked it.

M: Did the climate seem different to you?

C: Well, I've moved most of my life, so I've experienced this climate before. I've lived in Southern California at a time when it wasn't quite as damp as it is now, so it wasn't all that new to me.

M: What initial experiences did you have when you first came here? What were you doing out in the field?

C: Well, when I first came here we were concentrating almost 95 percent on what we call sign tailers or alien tracking in Century Valley. Very little work in town at that time. You just come to work and spend your whole day tracking aliens as they're walking north.

M: Did you catch a lot of 'em?

C: Not when I first came here I didn't. The numbers didn't start getting big until two years later.

M: Do you recall any particularly interesting experiences doing that, tracking aliens?

C: To me any tracking of an alien's interesting, so I guess it'd be interesting to me, it may not be to you.

M: I'd like to hear about it.

C: There's nothing amusing about it or anything, it's just any long chase is

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interesting, mainly to me. I enjoy it quite a bit, the tracking. So all of the cases are interesting, still are interesting. Some of the cases took particularly long, maybe like right up to Tucson and inside the city limits. Those are more memorable, when you track 'em right into the city limits. I tracked two for three days coming south. They were escapees from Florida, both in for narcotics smuggling, and I caught 'em on the third day. That was memorable.

M: You mean you tracked 'em out in the desert and actually worked your way to the outskirts of the city?

C: Yeah, we tracked 'em through the mountains north of here. They followed the northern route until they got to Continental, and at Continental they headed to the west across the...well, it wasn't Interstate then, across the highway, which at that time was Highway 89, and got over into the mine area. And tracked 'em through the mine area all through those roads south of Tucson and into the southwestern part of Tucson. In fact they were just about a quarter of a mile south of sector headquarters when we caught 'em.

M: Well I'll be darned. How long did it take?

C: It took about, oh, I think about 14 hours.

M: And you were walking all this time?

C: No. If you get some tracks going and you got enough people, you kind of leap frog. You find some tracks and stay on 'em, and a guy goes ahead of you where he thinks they might come out and he tries to find 'em. If he finds 'em then he'll follow 'em, and you go ahead of him and try to find where the tracks are. And if you find 'em you again follow 'em. You stay on 'em, because if he can't find 'em then you'll have to stay on 'em until they come out. Maybe they went to the brush and hiding, anything. But someone has to stay on the tracks.

M: Do you have dogs to help you out?

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C: No.

M: It must take pretty good skills to be able to follow tracks in that kind of a terrain.

C: Oh, I don't know.

M: I mean, how can you follow the tracks if they step on rocks, for example? What do you look for?

C: Well, you have to look for disturbed earth, which is sometimes pretty difficult if you got a lot of cattle around. Steppin' on a rock isn't a big deal if it's a small rock, it has to be a pretty good rock not to move from his weight, pretty good sized rock not to move from his weight. It's not all that rocky around here unless he gets pretty high up in the mountains. A few walk up there, but they eventually come out. See, this area here north of Nogales going toward Tucson, the watershed all leads into the Santa Cruz River, and all your washes run in a northerly direction. And it's almost natural for anybody walking to eventually come out along the river. That's the way you initially start, by checking the obvious places. These particular ones stayed up high, but we found 'em by checking some of the places where they usually walk. And they were up in the desert most of the time where it wasn't all that rocky, and we were able to track 'em.

M: You said that you spent two years doing that kind of work?

C: No, I spent most of my years doing that kind of work.

M: Oh, really?

C: Yeah.

M: When did you start working in the city?

C: Well, I can't remember the years when Commissioner Chapman took over. He made a concentration at the border trying to stop 'em directly at the border, and most of our efforts shifted to the border and the town. You will invariably

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pick up more aliens in town than you will out in the valley by tracking. And the emphasis has just gradually shifted to the border itself and the town. And you still can pick up more aliens in town or close to town. You still have 'em walking out in the valley, of course, but not as many as you have in town.

M: Do aliens create a big problem in downtown Nogales?

C: You mean illegal aliens?

M: Illegal aliens, yes.

C: Most of the downtown area is set up for the Sonorans to come over and shop. I'd say it does. The PD has quite a bit of trouble with shoplifters, and even the merchants have taken to hiring Mexican guards to watch some of the holes.

M: To watch holes?

C: To watch the holes and keep people from coming over while the stores are open. And then when the stores close, he goes home.

M: That's interesting.

C: Well, you can see that down at the end of Nelson Street. There'll be a guard sittin' there on the Mexican side watching the holes. You know, we'll patch 'em up one day and the next day they'll be open.

M: These are holes in the fence?

C: Holes in the fence, yeah.

M: Are there a lot of these holes in the fence?

C: Oh yeah, yeah. You just can't keep up with them. It'd take a couple of men full time just to keep up with the holes. And we don't have that, we just use a man. He does it part time, on a part time basis. He's our regular... what they call a mobile equipment servicer. He takes care of our vehicles and the area around the building, plus the fence. So he has quite a lot to do.

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- M: Besides shoplifting, what other problems do these aliens cause in downtown Nogales?
- C: Well, according to the PD and the Sheriff's office, they blame most of the breaking and entries on the illegal aliens, also. I don't know about that, but that's their statistics.
- M: Be interesting to talk to a merchant actually.
- C: Yes. Well, the merchant would be on shoplifting. They all have their own security, they do catch quite a few. And the PD, well most of the rings, burglary rings, that have been caught since I've been here has involved almost nothing but aliens. They would operate sometimes in gangs coming over at night and roaming around and hitting all the outlying houses. And the ones that have been caught have turned out to be all aliens.
- M: What experiences that you've had working in Nogales particularly stand out in your mind? What incidents would you consider interesting or outstanding, memorable?
- C: Oh, I don't know. I guess to me tracking is always, that's my first love, so that's always interesting, but mostly to me. Until recently I guess the most interesting thing has been really the narcotic smuggling. And of course that would always involve high speed chases and drawing guns and arms smugglers and things like that. And so I would have to say that was also interesting, too.
- M: You've been involved in those kinds of incidents?
- C: Yes, you couldn't be stationed here and not be involved. At one time Nogales was...probably there's more narcotics being smuggled through Nogales than anywhere else. That's what the Customs and DEA claimed. And we were catching 'em probably more than anybody else, at one time--several thousand pounds a week, usually.

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M: Could you describe a couple of these incidents that you've been involved in, just tell me what happened?

C: Oh gee, well, they happen all different ways. We had sensors everywhere. Sometimes I've answered usually, and a partner at night, we'll answer sensors which indicate their route of travel and go in ahead of 'em and wait for 'em in some canyon or some draw, someplace we think they're gonna walk. And it'll turn out to be narcotics smugglers usually from as few as two or three up to 20 or 30 men, smuggling or carrying big sacks of marijuana. And usually about all you can do, these are all illegal Mexicans, they're just what we call the mules. They're usually not really the guy who's the smuggler, so to speak. He's not the guy across the line who sets up the load and he's not the guy who on this side who buys it. And he's just an old working man, really what he is, usually trying to make a few bucks. But all you can do in that situation is just grab somebody. 'Cause as soon as you make a sound they drop everything and just run like rabbits back for the border. So you just grab one or two and hang on to 'em. Usually there's no violence involved in that. Sometimes there is. We had one boy here who, they weren't armed, but he just about got run over. They were trying to get past him. In fact, he did get knocked down. There was just so many of 'em they just dropped everything and ran back his way in a little narrow canyon, and he just got knocked down and run over.

M: A Border Patrol agent?

C: Yeah. We've had incidents down in the tunnel. We have two tunnels coming from Mexico into the United States and they're mainly just drain tunnels, flood tunnels, and they're sensed. And a few years ago we had two boys that answered the sensor, they went down in separate places, and the one who went furthest to the south caught four aliens. And they had

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heard the one to the north and got scared and dropped everything and came back. One of 'em was armed and he shot at our agent several times. They exchanged gunfire, the smuggler got hit in the arm. That's kind of a bad place to do anything, and you ever get shot down there you'd never get out. There's no way to get a vehicle down there, and [they] either have to carry you a couple of miles on a stretcher or get you up through a little ol' narrow manhole. And we've had shootings involving some of these canyons usually where they would come through the fence in their car and be armed, and when they'd see our car, they'd just start shooting. We had two guys shot and one vehicle shot up quite a bit in an incident like that. Most of my incidents have...I've never even been involved in a shooting. I've gotten several who have been armed, but they've never attempted to use their weapons. And I think all the armed incidents I've had have always involved cars.

M: Have you ever pulled your gun?

C: Well, usually when you're dealing with a narcotics smuggler, he's committing a felony and quite often he's armed. You'd be foolish not to pull your gun. There's no such thing as a movie fastdraw, you're supposed to be prepared. They don't usually have much respect for it, they usually run. (Chuckles) Which you can't do anything about. But it's just to protect yourself.

M: They know that probably you're not going to shoot.

C: Well, we can't shoot.

M: You can't shoot.

C: No, you can't shoot at anybody running from you. You can just use your weapon to defend yourself or a fellow officer. You can't shoot anybody running. Now they seem to know that, too.

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M: Have you dealt with particular sad situations with aliens, families perhaps that you've apprehended who had a hardship case, anything like this?

C: Oh, I find that most of the aliens are, they do have a hardship, the majority of 'em, or else they wouldn't be coming over here. And the average one of 'em is over here basically just to work. Probably what you or the newspapers would call a hardship case, I don't. They guy, the young man who's married to an American citizen and he has a family, and just because she's 300 pounds and 10 years older than him, I don't think there's any love involved and I can't really have much sympathy for him. And he's on welfare and been on welfare. And quite often you run into that type of case, which usually doesn't invoke any...or you don't feel sympathetic toward. All you really feel sorry for are just the average old working man who's trying to make his way north, and he means nobody any harm, he's not likely to steal from you, he'll ask you for something to eat, and he's basically honest. He just wants to work. Those are the ones the I feel sorry for, and most of the other fellows do too. They're just really nothing but honest, hardworking people, basically. They're breaking a law by leaving their country. But to me they're the sad cases. And also when you pick 'em up, up north, and they're being exploited, and I've seen 'em in Phoenix and California when I've been on detail, where they're living in pigpens and chicken coops and dog houses and they're paying them a couple of dollars a day. And to me those are the sad cases. And they'll cheat 'em out of the money they owe 'em, and yet they claim to be their friend. They call 'em brother and they get with the newspapers and say how we're pickin' on 'em--but they don't say what they're doing and where they're making 'em live and what they're paying 'em. Those the the pitiful cases that you never see.

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- M: Is there any one particular case that you remember? As you describe these circumstances, any case in particular that stands out, going to one of these areas where these people are exploited that way?
- C: Oh, I remember a case in California when I was on detail that every single person they had working for 'em was illegal, except the foreman. And there was one whole family that came out, and we picked up probably about 20 people there.
- M: Was this a ranch?
- C: It was a ranch. It was a...well, a vineyard. And the foreman all the way from the grandmother, the grandfather down to the littlest two or three-year-old was cussin' us out and calling us names and telling us how bad we were. And they were their brothers. These people weren't Spanish, they were Sicilian; but they were their brothers and we were the villains. And they wouldn't let anybody see where they lived. They didn't want anybody to see where they lived. They wanted to go get their clothes and stuff by themselves and bring it out. This was a few years ago. At that time an alien could probably earn \$35 a day and up picking wine grapes. You know, you just pick 'em and throw 'em in a big gondola. And most of the guys who pick up really hustle. They're just running, they'll be pickin' grapes, put 'em in a bucket, and then he'll run with the bucket to the gondola then he'll run back to the vines and he'll be pickin'. And at that time just about all of 'em got at least \$35 bucks a day. It's a cooperative thing, they get a percentage of the profits from the gondola.
- M: That's interesting in itself that they would do it that way.
- C: Well, anyway, they paid 'em, and one of the guys looked at the guy's check and he had like five days coming or whatever. So he should've got five times \$35, but he had just about half that amount. And the guy asked him,

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"For how many days is that?" And he told him. He says. "Holy mackerel, you should've got more than that." Then they jumped on us. "You got no right to look at that man's check. What're you doing looking at that man's check?" And they just had another fit.

M: The owners?

C: The owners, yeah. But they were really exploiting those poor people. We felt bad about that. Just so many of 'em do.

M: Did you see the type of housing that they lived in?

C: No, I didn't personally, someone else went. We had so many that we had to have some people guarding them and some people go with the owners to get their belongings. But on that particular detail where I saw more people living in pigpens and chicken coops, it just...really sickening. I can't imagine people making other people do that.

M: This was on another occasion when you saw people living in these pigpens, as you call them?

C: These particular aliens weren't living in pigpens that I know of, but I have seen 'em living in pigpens.

M: In California?

C: Over in California, and I saw some in Phoenix.

M: In Phoenix also. Could you describe what you saw in those particular places?

C: Well, you've seen a pigpen itself, it's just like a little corral. You know, you have a board fence or a wire fence. I remember the one in Phoenix, particularly, had a board fence and the fences was very close together, moreso than an ordinary corral. And it had a big yard which was all muddy, and it had a old pig shed which was probably about six by six or maybe eight by eight, with a small entrance about three feet high. And there was about

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four or five aliens living in it. They had big sheets of cardboard that they were laying on and they had all their clothes in there. And that's where this old boy put 'em. And it's, I guess it's a problem you never hear about. We pick 'em up and they're living in a chicken coop or a pigpen or something like that, or something worse, and we don't hear much about it. Unfortunately we probably should call the newspaper and have 'em take pictures. We'd like to, anyway.

M: What stops you from doing that?

C: Oh, I don't know, you're just doing your job--pick 'em up and process 'em and send 'em back.

M: Any other incidents that stand out in your mind?

C: Oh, I don't know, I can remember one alien I never caught. I swear he must've been one of those Indians. Down around Chihuahua they got this big canyon they live in.

M: Oh, Tarahumaras. They're famed for being runners.

C: Yeah. He was dressed in a white pants and a white shirt and he had a red bandana. I saw him and he'd seen me, and he didn't even worry about it, you know. I tried to chase him on foot and he just loped like a deer. And I'd get in my vehicle and I'd chase him on a vehicle. You got fences around here so he'd always put a fence or two between us and he'd hop 'em just like a deer. He's unbelievable. But anyway, he'd stay ahead of me all the time. And so I got some help from this guy. He came up and went the way he did and I went north trying to cut him off. We waited for quite a while, and so I came back south thinking, "Well, he must've cut off and gone somewhere else." And I was talking to a rancher there and I looked up in the hills and I saw a white spot, and he was laying there watching the guy to the south. And I called him and I said, "I think that guy's watching you or waiting for you."

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And he says, "I thought I heard somebody singing." So they guy was singing to him, serenading him.

He got away that evening and I picked up his tracks again the next day. And he was quite a bit north. And I tried the same thing, I tried to get close to him with the vehicle, as close as I could with the vehicle, which he wouldn't let me do. And then I tried chasing him on foot, but about every step I took he gained about two. And it was up around the Canoa Ranch in that area, up north of Namoto. And the valley is shaped, well, like a valley, like a big bowl. And I was up on one side and I could see his progress across the valley going west and going up the other side. And I had another fellow come up and help, and he was trying to head him off, 'cause he went across the highway and across the river and across the highway. And he got across the highway and across the river and across the highway. And he got across the highway and he started heading north again. And it's all up and down there, just up and down. And I'd tell this ol' boy in his jeep where to stop to get ahead of him, 'cause I could see him with binoculars--a little ol' white speck. And first time we just missed him, come up just behind him, the timing was off. So we came up ahead of him the next time, and every time when I chased him I'd yell at him to stop, he'd go, "Andale." (Laughter) Just like in the cartoons. "Andale"--just inviting me to chase him. And when this other guy yelled at him, the old boy, he went, "Andale," he just took off like a rabbit. And he chased him for a long time, and I could see both of 'em every once in a while. And once time the old boy he waited for him, the alien waited for him. And I could see him up on a ridge and he was skipping rocks. He was just playing with him. (Laughter) He got up close to him a second time

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and he says, "You can't get away, stop." And the old boy, "Andale."

He just took off. We never did catch him.

M: Well, it seems funny now, but at the time did you think it was funny?

C: Oh yeah, it was funny. It's not so funny when you're chasing 'em on foot and you can't get away. But it gets to be funny real quick, you know, soon as you catch your breath.

M: Was that in the summertime?

C: Yeah.

M: Must've been hot out there.

C: Yeah. All he had was just a shirt and pants and this red bandana on his head. He wasn't carrying any water or any clothes or anything. Well, as fast as he could run, he didn't need it.

M: Do a lot of people do that--walk on foot from Nogales to Tucson or Phoenix?

C: Oh yeah, sure do. The trend has gotten now more towards smuggling. You have more people across the line who will try to set up a smuggling load because it's so profitable, but you still have quite a few walking, that try to get through by walking. Quite a few.

M: What's the system in organizing a little group to be smuggled in on a vehicle?

C: Oh, it varies, you know. We got one guy who goes down to Michoacán and hires people out of one village. That way he knows we can never put anybody, you know, an informant in with his group. Everybody knows everybody else. You've got that method. And you've got, oh, everything very casual, where he just stands over there and watches 'em come off the bus and says, "I'll get you north to Phoenix for a hundred bucks." He'll get a carload. Some of 'em will try to get 'em to Phoenix, some of 'em will just take 'em across the line and lose 'em, leave 'em. About a year or two ago they had two killed.

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The guy, we believe apparently he just brought 'em across on that pretext that he was gonna take 'em north, and shot 'em both, left 'em. The sheriff's office found the man who did it, but the informant who informed on him was in México and they never could get the two together. So he went free back to México. They turned him over to the Mexican police, and what happened to him then I don't know. You even have some smugglers who will guarantee 'em a ride for the \$100 or \$200 dollars to Phoenix or wherever they want to go, Utah or Colorado. If they pay and they keep their mouth shut if they're caught, they'll give 'em another ride and guarantee him passage--iron-clad guarantee.

M: I'm curious about your first name, Mario. Is your mother Mexican American?

C: No, my father's Costa Rican.

M: Your father's Costa Rican. That explains it.

C: Yeah. He came to this country when he was about twenty-one. Yeah, he was born and raised in Costa Rica.

M: I see. And his name is Chamberlain?

C: Yeah.

M: That's interesting. And your mother, where is she from?

C: She's a Kentucky hillbilly. They met in college.

M: I have an interest in the Appalachian area, the people who live there, that's a fascinating area. I'd like to do some-study of that area some time in the future. Right now I'm doing this, but sometime I'd like to move up there and spend some time there.

C: Yeah, it would be interesting. Her mother is Indian, Cherokee Indian.

M: Is that right?

C: How she ever got to Oklahoma, I don't know, but...

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M: You have an interesting background.

C: It's like most Americans, we're all mixed.

M: That's true, there's such a big mixture. Well, the most interesting part of these interviews of course are the experiences of people, the incidents that you were describing are all very interesting. I wonder if you can think of another one. These kinds of stories are of great human interest. And if you can think of anything else you would like to tell me about.

C: Gee, I don't know. It's like I said before, it's almost like a BS session-- one guy tells a story that makes you think of one.

M: It just triggers, I know. I know, that's when they come out.

C: Yeah.

M: I know what you're saying.

C: We get a lot of southbound aliens who have worked in Colorado and Idaho. Idaho believe it or not has a large illegal alien population, mostly working in potato fields. But like everywhere else in the country they're also adopting skills, too, you know--welders and bricklayers and things like that. We get quite a few coming south through here going home, and process them.

M: Oh, you pick 'em up if they're coming south?

C: Yeah. Not always. Quite often we're just too busy. But they're not too hard to spot. Southbound, what we call southbound load, quite often it's just the ranchers bringing 'em home. And he'll pick 'em up next spring, too, won't he? Same ones. But usually we're just too busy to; they're going home anyway. And all we do, just make a record of 'em. So we're just delaying 'em for an hour or two, that's about all. So usually we just have too much to do to try to even pick 'em up.

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M: Well, I guess I'll turn off the tape recorder for now. I want to thank you very much for agreeing to take the time to do this interview. I've learned something and I've enjoyed it. Thank you very much.

C: You're welcome.