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Interview no. 610

Bill Rodríguez

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Bill Rodríguez (1936 -)

INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez and Mario Galdos

PROJECT: Border Labor History

DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 24, 1979

TERMS OF USE: RESTRICTED

TAPE NO.: 610

TRANSCRIPT NO.: 610

TRANSCRIBER: Irene Ramírez

DATE TRANSCRIBED: March 16, 1982

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in El Paso, Texas, in November 8, 1936.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

(El Paso Chief of Police, 1977 -) Grew up in El Paso; experiences in high school; experiences as a person of Mexican-Anglo heritage; worked as mathematician's aid in White Sands, New Mexico; worked in Puerto Rico as a management trainee; attitudes toward Puerto Ricans; police brutality in El Paso in 1950s; career as police officer in El Paso.

Length of Interview: 1 hour Length of Transcript: 30 pages

BILL RODRIGUEZ

by Oscar J. Martínez and Mario Galdos

May 24, 1979

M: First, Chief Rodríguez, could you tell us where and when you were born, please?

R: Okay, I was born in El Paso, Texas, in November 8, 1936.

M: Did you grow up here?

R: Yes.

M: Where did you go to school?

R: I went to Lamar School, El Paso High, El Paso Tech.

M: Is Lamar School in South El Paso?

R: No, Lamar School was at 1600 East Yandell at that time. It's a vacant lot now.

M: What did your father do for a living?

R: My father was in the produce business.

M: Locally?

R: Locally.

M: What do you remember about your elementary school days? What incidents stand out in your mind, what teachers stand out in your mind?

R: Well you know, I went to Lamar School and I felt that I had some very good teachers at Lamar School. I'll relate some of the teachers to you that stand out in my mind. I had a Mrs. Windmer, and she taught English at Lamar School and she gave me a very good foundation for English, I feel, in my later life. Of course at the time I didn't realize it. I also had a Math teacher there, Mrs. Williams, and she stands out in my mind because Math was always kind of my subject, and I learned a lot from her, I feel, as far as Math goes. One other teacher that stood out in my mind was a Mrs. Donovan, and she taught World History. And she was very up to date on her history and she kept us plugging away and learning quite a few things in history, world history. And to this

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date I'm appreciative in that area, too.

M: Was it an ethnically mixed school?

R: Yes. At that time, Oscar, we probably didn't really think of each other as maybe Mexican American and Anglo. I had many friends that were Anglo and Mexican American as I was growing up, and we just didn't make this difference at that time for some reason. I just never made it.

M: Do you recall any ethnically related incidents or experiences that you yourself might've gone through or that you might've observed during your elementary school days?

R: In the elementary school days? No, I don't. The only thing I used to recall in elementary school is that you couldn't speak Spanish on the school grounds. But I do not speak Spanish, so I don't know, I just kind of didn't pay too much attention to that. I don't know if you are aware that I did not speak Spanish, but I don't. And I'll give you a reason for that in a minute if you ask me. But that's about the only thing that I noticed that was kind of different, they wouldn't allow the kids to talk Spanish on the school grounds.

M: Okay, I'll ask you. What is the reason for not speaking Spanish?

R: What is the reason for that? Well, my father is Mexican and my mother was Anglo. She was born in Detroit, my father was born in Michoacán, México. And we spoke English in the household. And of all my family, only my older sister learned Spanish after she married, and now she speaks it very fluently; and my brother who went to México for two years and then came back, and he could speak it fluently. But the rest of us don't do so well in Spanish, very limited.

M: What about the neighborhood where you lived? Was that ethnically mixed?

R: It was a mixed neighborhood. It was a semi...it wasn't a rich neighborhood, it was kind of a poor neighborhood. I didn't feel I was poor, but I knew I

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wasn't rich, certainly. But it was a mixed neighborhood at that time.

M: From Lamar School, where did you go?

R: I went to El Paso High.

M: To El Paso High. And what experiences stand out in your mind from El Paso High?

R: Well, you know, when I went to El Paso High, I believe it was in '52 or '51, I don't remember the year, but El Paso High was mixed when I went there. And I don't know, we had some...now I did notice some differences. We used to have some kids that came from Vilas and Smeltertown, and it seems to me that they did not have the educational background that I had gotten. For instance, we had a guy that came from Smeltertown that couldn't say the ABCs. And this struck, you know. I knew something was wrong there, because here I knew that the Mexican American that had gone to Lamar, and we had super teachers, I feel, and had learned. And yet this guy was, it looked to me like he was just passed because of his size. And he really, I don't know what kind of instruction he got and where he got it, but he didn't get very much. And I did notice that, that did stand out. I knew that the kids that came from Morehead and Lamar and Mesita seemed to be the best, the most well achieved at high school. The kids that came from Vilas and maybe Smeltertown and those areas didn't do quite as well.

M: Did you have any sense of why there was that difference? Did you think about it much?

R: I didn't, I didn't really think about it that much. I knew that Smeltertown was a rough place to go to, because we used to drive up there on our bikes and we used to hassle, you know, the kids would chase us and we'd have to fight 'em once in a while. And I knew that they were a little bit more aggressive than we were, that's the way I saw it. I was not that aggressive although I didn't back off from things. But you know, I grew up in a

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neighborhood where you had to fight, too, but it seemed like the fights that we had were friendly fights with each other and they were not the knock-down type that we might get involved with up at Smeltertown. And I figured that the people from Smeltertown were pretty rough and maybe the teachers were rough. And I don't know, I just didn't put two and two together I guess.

M: What about in school itself? Did you have any sense of the differences between the Anglo students and the Mexican American students?

R: Well, I did for the poor ones, the poor Mexican Americans seemed not to mingle. The middle class, of which I consider myself a middle class...okay, I want you to understand. Whether I was or not, I don't know. It seemed like the middle class Mexican American just sifted right in, but the kid like I'm talking about that came from Smeltertown was out smoking, did not participate in groups, did not participate in the classrooms, was failing all the time, was having more of a problem. And it looked to me kind of like his problem was there before he even got there, I don't know. That's what I sensed. The middle class or the group that I felt I came from seemed to sift right in, I don't know why. I had a good background and I didn't have a difficult time talking or studying or doing the work, and maybe this was the reason. If I had had a difficulty there I may have pulled off to the side. I don't know, I can't answer that.

M: Did the Anglo students hold most of the leadership positions? Were they the achievers more than the Mexican Americans?

R: I think they were probably more the achievers only because there was more of 'em when I went to El Paso High. You see, I went with a mixture of Syrian--there's quite a few Syrians that went to El Paso High--and Mexican Americans and Anglos. And the Anglo people did hold some positions it seemed like more, but some of the Mexican Americans held some positions. I look back and, like I say, the middle class guy was in there, it seemed, like just like everybody else.

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I didn't notice the difference at that stage in the game. And I don't know, maybe it was because I was at El Paso High. I do know that I tried to go to Austin and they wouldn't let me transfer. I lived out of the district. I realize that, but I understand that Austin was a little bit more ethnic oriented than El Paso High, and that may have been the reason. I can't say for sure.

M: But you did try?

R: I did try, yeah. I don't know why I did, but I did.

M: Well, that's interesting. Austin is a very interesting case, Austin High School.

R: Oscar, let me go back in history a little bit. You have to understand that my makeup is probably a little different than the other Mexican Americans. My grandmother was Anglo and she was very strong. And she took me right under the wing when I was a kid. And she used to take me in restaurants. And I'm dark, I look Mexican and I can't speak Spanish, but she had blue eyes and very light complected and looked all Anglo. And she used to take me everywhere with her, she wouldn't let me out of her sight, she babied me. And she used to take me into restaurants and tell me to walk up with my head up in the air, that I was as good as anybody in that restaurant, and don't ever forget it. And I grew up with a background, maybe I didn't grow up with a background of being subservient. I don't say, "Yes, sir," to Anglos because they're Anglos. I didn't grow up with that background, a lot of Mexican American did. My dad says, "Yes, sir," to an Anglo, and I don't know why to this day--to a younger Anglo, and I don't do that. I say, "Yes, sir," to an older man, I don't care what he is. But you see, I see some of the other Mexican Americans that grew up in the schools do the same thing, that didn't have the background and education to do it.

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M: Well, I think that's why your perspective is so unique and so interesting. And growing up in both communities, in both groups, is why your insights would be especially significant.

R: There's another thing that's very important here, too, in my makeup. My mother and father used to take us to the movies all the time. Movies cost nine cents in those days. We had no television. We used to go the Plaza Theater, the L and A, and see every movie under the sun. We'd go into one movie and go to another movie. My dad made fairly good money but he drank a lot. And I'm not afraid to admit that, but he did drink a lot, but he was good to the family. And we used to see all these movies. And I was always trying to emulate people that were great. I used to see Alexander the Great and stuff like that, and I'd read their books and stuff. I always wanted to be somebody outside of the crowd, I guess. Somewhere back there I wanted to be somebody that was not just a number.

M: Where did you get that desire to do that?

R: I think my dad, my mother, my grandmother, the three of 'em, and my grandfather before he died put it in me. Someway, I don't know how, they put it there.

They didn't come out and say it, you know, this and this and this. I think that's where it came from, my parents and from my grandparents.

M: Were you conscious that you had a mixed background?

R: Yes, I was. But I'll be truthful with you, it seems that when the relatives would come from Mexico that my mother acted a little differently sometimes, and when her relatives would come it would be another difference. I don't know, maybe she was aloof to the Mexican relatives, if I could say that. And I don't want to be unfair to my mother 'cause she was a very good mother, but I did detect a little bit of that growing up. Did it bother me? No.

M: Did it make any difference in the way you related to Mexican Americans or

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Anglos among your peers?

R: I think it made a little difference because I seemed to associate with the Anglo girls more when I was growing up for some reason, and I don't know why. Maybe I was embarrassed that I couldn't talk Spanish, and if I went out with a Spanish girl they would talk Spanish and I would be embarrassed. And to avoid that I kind of leaned towards the Anglo girl. This did happen.

M: It happens today, too, to a lot of kids.

R: Yes, I know it does.

M: What about your mother? Can you tell us a little bit about her background?

R: Oh, my mother was a great woman. She was fantastically smart, smart, smart woman. She could write, she could read, she could play the piano, she could discuss, she had a fantastic mind. I see her as a fantastic mind. She was a little loose, she didn't know how to control money. My dad is a rock of Gibraltar, he's the stable guy. He's the guy that's always there. My mother get's excited or got excited, but she was fantastically intelligent the way I related to her. She could write, she would write my notes or help me out on certain things, and she could understand most anything she read. She would write poems and things of this nature. She even started to write a book, I guess, a few times. And she worked in a music shop. She understood the arts, you might say, much more than my dad did.

But my dad was basically smart. He had the basics of how to get from one point to another, he knew those things. He was educated in México. He didn't come from a very rich family but he was educated, and he was selected by Ford Motor to go to Ford Motor here in the states and learn the assembly line. He went there, met my mother, married her, and for some reason he went back to México and didn't get into the assembly line business, opened a still for himself over there in México, a whiskey still. Very independent, but

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always wanted to come back to the states. So he came back to the states and, you know, he brought my mother back. She was down in México for a little while but she didn't like it. You got to understand, those were the Revolution days and they even stopped the train, Villa did or some revolutionaries did. And there were some troubles in México at that time. Anyway, he came back to the states and he got into the produce business and he had his business in Juárez and in El Paso. And he did very well moneywise, I had no problem with money. My dad would give me a dollar a day, and in those days you could go to five movies on a dollar. He gave me an allowance of a dollar a day, and sometimes more. But he was not rich, but he was not rich.

M: That's pretty good for you, though.

R: No, it was pretty good. I never hurt for money. I didn't get bicycles like other kids might, new bicycles. But as far as pocket money, I always seemed to have a dollar or 50 cents. But I never got a bicycle like the kid across the street might've got. I got the smaller things. I guess I wasn't hurting too bad, but we were not rich.

M: When did you graduate from high school?

R: Well, I didn't graduate from high school. I quit El Paso High and went to Tech, and then I went in the service and got my GED.

M: Why did you quit El Paso High?

R: I started running around, Oscar. I started running around with a rough crowd, what you might call cowboys. And they were chasing the girls quite readily and taking girls to the drive-inn and drinking wine, and I just quit school. We didn't, I never did anything criminal--you know, a felony or anything like that. About the worst I did was drink a beer when I was sixteen. And we just got into a wild crowd. My mother knew I quit school, but my dad didn't. I used to get up and act like I was going to school and I never told him.

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M: Where did you go?

R: We used to go out all day in the car. I didn't have a car but the other guys did. There were several of us, a couple of 'em were Anglos and a couple Mexican Americans. And we'd get girls and fool around. Every day.

M: How long did this go on?

R: Oh, I guess for about a year or two.

M: Every day you'd just go outside...

R: Every day. I guess it was a year, I don't really remember how long it was. It was a bad point in my life, and I'll tell you why.

M: It must've been fun, though.

R: It was fun, but I was very good in sports, very good in sports in grade school. I was one of the fastest runners in my class all the time. I could broadjump further than anybody my age, and I could play football very well. And I went to high school in the eighth grade and I made the team, but I quit before our first game, and I've often felt bad about that. That I was a very avid athlete and I think I could've gone to college very easily on a scholarship, and maybe somewhere else, I don't know. I was not that big, but I was not that small, 'cause I used to weightlift a lot.

M: How tall are you?

R: About six feet.

M: And then you went to Tech?

R: Yeah, then I went to Tech. Now Tech, you got to understand, was just after the Korean war. And we had a lot of GI's going there under the GI Bill. And I took some courses at Tech and there were some gangs at Tech, the Hopheads they called them in those days, who just went to school because the law made 'em go. And they would smoke marijuana down the street, but I never did. And they knew me from El Paso High though, and they didn't fool

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with me, even though I was a Mexican American wearing cowboy boots. They found it somewhat difficult that I would relate to the Anglo that well, but they never bothered me that much. And at Tech I enjoyed Tech very well. It was a pretty good school, it was more open and free than El Paso High. It was more toned for adults than teenagers. El Paso High was funner, if I had to say which one was a better school. But I learned a lot at Tech, too; made some good friends.

M: And you didn't graduate from Tech either?

R: No, I didn't graduate either. I lacked about a year. And I went into the Army and got my GED and that's where I... When my mother died, my mother always wanted me to go to college. Always. And so did my dad, but my mother moreso. And when she died in '61 I promised her, I promised myself, I was already married, that I would go to college. And it was a burning desire in me at that point. So much so that I was ready to quit the police department.

M: Oh, you were already in the police department?

R: I was already on the police department at that time. And '65 I started college and I was ready to resign, and they were not letting anybody go to school at that time from the police department. And I came in with my resignation, but a Captain Islas on the police department told me that he would work me evenings and graveyards if I would stay on the police department. And I told him, I said, "Well, you know I need the work." But I'd already moved my wife in with my father. He was living by himself now because my mother had passed away. I sold my house, moved in with my father, I made a lot of sacrifices to do this, and we were living free at my dad's house and my wife was working. I was prepared to go to college full time. But I didn't have to.

M: But you went?

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R: But I went.

M: To UTEP?

R: Yes.

M: And you got a degree?

R: I started in January of 1966 and I graduated in August of 1969, three and a half years, working full time. And that was probably the worst thing I ever did. It was too...I needed 122 hours to graduate in my major which was Accounting, and I had 122 exactly when I graduated. I didn't change. And not many people have done that, as I understand it. But I had my sights set and I went and I went every summer. And I got ulcers in '68 because of it.

M: Oh, it must've been rough.

R: It was not worth it, I don't think. I should've taken a few more years to do it.

M: You were working full time and taking school also.

R: Working full time and I had two kids at the house, and my wife was working. I used to sleep three hours a day. And my baby, my wife just had a baby when I started college and the baby would cry. And if you know Accounting, there's a lot of busywork in Accounting, and I used to sit for hours at a table and I was working Accounting problems.

M: That's something to be proud of then. It shows a lot of motivation, a lot of drive.

R: There was, the drive was there. I couldn't do it now. I couldn't do it today. No way.

M: There's a lot of things I couldn't do now that I've done before.

R: This going to college was also spurred on by my wife. I want you to know that she was super. She wanted the better things in life as I did. And she helped me a lot in college--not with the homework so much but helping me in the hard times. Now, my wife is Mexican. Full blooded.

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M: From here?

R: Well, she was from Los Angeles. Born here but raised in Los Angeles in the Anglo set up up there, but came back to El Paso.

M: Let me go back to the time that you left Tech and went into the service. How long were you in the service?

R: Well, I went in six months in the service.

M: Oh, you were a reserve?

R: No, no, no. First I had some space there. I quit Tech and I went out to White Sands and worked as a mathematician's aid. I'd worked other jobs, a couple of other jobs, but part time, and I went to work at White Sands I would say in 1956. I think it was in 1956. If I recall I worked there two years. I went to work in White Sands. I didn't go as a mathematician's aide, they hired me originally as a to work on the survey team up at Holloman Air Force base. But nobody ever told me to go to Holloman, so the first day I reported I reported at White Sands, and they stuck me in the office there for a while 'til I could go out to Holloman and start working in the field. Well, while I was at White Sands working in the office, there was this Anglo girl there who was married and had a degree in Mathematics and she was a professional there, and she started showing me some of the work. And I seemed to have caught on pretty quick and they just kept me in there for two years, until I quit. And then I quit and joined the police department in May of '58.

M: At that time you didn't need a high school diploma?

R: Well you did, but they made a waiver over there or something. I don't know what it was.

M: And when you joined the police department, what position did you hold?

R: Well, when I came on the police department I came on as a patrolman. My brother was a police officer, this is why I came on the police department.

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My brother had joined the police department about a year before, or two. He had just returned from the Navy and he had joined the police department. And I had a very good job at White Sands, but Civil Service is not quite what it's made out to be. I found myself, we were in an office with people who had degrees, and I seemed to...I was a young guy, 18, and between you and me, I'd come home every night and we'd go to the bars and drink. Yeah, the long drive and sitting in an office with no windows, and I used to get off work and come home to the bars. But they never asked to see my ID. Of course I may have looked older, I don't know, maybe I ran with an older-looking crowd. But White Sands, I found myself, there was not enough to do. The work scheduling was not heavy enough. And although the older people there seemed to occupy themselves by doing something, I guess, I guess they were goofing off, boy I'd run up and get all the work I could, you know what I mean? I don't know, I was just eating it up. They'd bring in something and before the other guys could get it, I'd go and grab it. And I used to do all the work it seemed like, 'cause I wanted to. And they didn't seem to want to stop me. But I was always, I was bored. It was a boring job to some degree. It was a good job, and if I'd stayed there I'd have been probably making as much as I'm making today, I don't know. But I just couldn't see sitting in that office the rest of my life. I wasn't meeting people. I'd meet the office people, but that wasn't enough. So I joined the police department.

M: Did your brother encourage you to do that?

R: To some degree he did. When I came in for the interview with the Chief of Police, he told me right then, he says, "I don't know what the hell you want to be a policeman for, you have a damn good job." And I said, "Yes, I know I do, but I'd just like to try it." And so I did.

G: Did you go through the Police Academy?

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R: I went to the first police academy. It was two weeks, and was the first one they ever had. Prior to that they used to put 'em in the field without going through the academy.

M: Is that right?

R: Yeah. When I started they started their first two week academy, six days a week. We used to work six days a week on the police department, and so we went to school six days a week at the academy. And I don't even know how well I did in comparison to the rest of the class in the academy. I was a young kid, really; I was 21, I was the youngest one in the police department when I came on. And of course we didn't have very many policeman in those days, probably about two hundred.

M: This was in...

R: '58.

M: And what was the ethnic breakdown?

R: Of the police department then?

M: Yes.

R: Okay, at the lower levels it seemed to me like it was almost pretty even.

M: Pretty even?

R: Yes, at that time. One would expect it might've been different, but it was not. Now the higher ranks were mostly Anglos, yes. In fact, Islas was the only one that was up there.

M: Was it Captain Islas?

R: Captain Islas.

M: I went to school with his son, Mario, who's now a priest.

R: Yes, that's the same one.

M: And I've heard some really good things about Captain Islas. Could you tell me about him?

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R: Well, he was good to me in many respects. I don't think he was an administrator.

M: He was in an administrative position?

R: Yes, he was a captain when I came on the police department. He was probably a damn good officer coming up the ranks, but as an administrator I just don't know. As later on I found out that it wasn't quite what it could've been. He was a very intelligent man, he's not dumb. He didn't write very well, he'd put down an order and there'd be all kinds of mistakes in it. But all in all he was kind of a fair man, I think. I think he was the, if you want to say it, the token Mexican.

M: Really?

R: He might've been the one, yeah.

M: What causes you to say that?

R: Well, because I look around and I don't think that he had all the capabilities necessary to handle the jobs that he had, but neither did a lot of other people, so I'm not sure about that. There were a few Anglos that didn't have the capabilities.

M: When you first joined the force as a patrolman, what was a routine day like in your work?

R: Well, let me go back just a little bit and give you some background here. I did not like police officers when I joined the police department. I thought they were too aggressive with the people. And of course you gotta go back to 1958, they were very brutal with the people. They arrested a guy, and if he said one word they'd knock him over the head. That's the way it was in those days. That's the days of the Seven X gangs and all the rough gangs. And they never roughed me up. Now only one night one Mexican cop downtown popped me in the gut with his baton a couple of times, but he never hit me.

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M: In El Paso?

R: Yeah. He was a Mexican officer, big one, big son of a gun. Downtonw. We came to a midnight movie, and he told me to shut up and I had laughed, and he punched me twice. And I shut up. Anyway, I never had too many run-ins with the police, but I did think they were very aggressive, I didn't think that they gave the people half a chance. And when I joined the police department I found that the officers were exactly what I had thought, that they were very aggressive with people, very aggressive, very brutal. And this bothered me a lot at first, I almost quit. I was more humanistic I guess, I don't know, I guess my background. And it seemed to me that the officers, even the Mexican American, was very brutal, very. And this bothered me a lot in '58. Now you got to understand in '58, this was before any of the civil rights and all this other stuff. And people accepted the police department as it was, to some degree.

M: Do you think the officers were as brutal with Mexican Americans as they were with Anglos?

R: They were more so with the Mexican American, in those days, yes. But I saw brutality against everybody, not only them.

M: Were you conscious of that different treatment?

R: I guess I was to a degree. But I don't know if it bothered me. You've got to understand, you know, you're growing up and you're on a police department, and the brutality itself did bother me. That it was geared towards the Mexican American more than others, no, I can't say that that actually bothered me in itself. The brutality itself bothered me. You've got to understand, we were dealing with criminals, and the brutality was exhibited mostly towards the criminals who were burglars. And in those days, I guess not too many people cared about their rights, including citizens, as well as the police, if you

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know what I mean.

M: Yeah.

R: They never filed a complaint. In those days, a Mexican American that was beat up would not file a complaint. Not because it wouldn't be investigated, because it was macho not to. So I don't know, I just... You see what I'm trying to say?

M: Yes.

R: It was macho not to complain. But neither did the officer complain if he got the shit beat out of him, or got cut. He didn't file an aggravated assault against the guy. We just took it, I guess we both took our lumps. Of course the police came out on the top most of the time, as you well know.

M: Could you trace your career in the police department, the various jobs that you had?

R: Okay. Well, I stayed in patrol, and then I found myself not making detective on the police department. Detective at that time was picked, they were picked from the ranks, and detectives meant more pay--and also wearing suits and getting the better job. And it was a natural attrition to go up through the detective rank, natural career thing. But only certain people seemed to be selected. Not only the Anglo but the Mexican American who seemed to kiss somebody's back, and the Anglo at this time. But I thought I was smarter than some of the guys going up. In fact I knew I was, because I was beatin' em on some of the exams. I took an exam two and a half years, when I was a policeman, for sergeant. And I was the only radio patrolman (we had a separation then between traffic and radio patrolman) that passed the exam, out of maybe over 150 guys, two hundred. And I was the only radio patrolman that passed it. And yet some other guys in traffic who made maybe as high as I did or a little less were promoted to detective, and I got the feeling that somebody didn't like me upstairs.

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I don't know why, I really don't know why. But I got very disillusioned with the police department, because I knew I knew more than the guys that were going up. And I didn't make sergeant on that exam because I didn't have my five points, veteran points, then. You had to have five points, and it was very difficult to overcome. So, that coupled with my ambition to go to college, I just said, "To hell with it, I'm going to school." And that's when I went to college.

I started college and I really put forth effort in school, really worked at it. I wrote all my papers, nobody typed anything for me. Nobody did anything, cheating for me, which I had available. In fact, the policeman that started to go after I went would tell me the easy teachers, and I would take the hard ones, because I knew I would learn more. I was up there for an education, I was not up there for a game. And too many of the officers, Anglo and Mexican American, were going there for the money and the GI Bill. They didn't give a damn about learning. And I went there to learn, that's all there was to it. I made sergeant in 1969, about four months before I graduated I made sergeant. I became a sergeant and I worked from say May of '69 to '70, and I became very disillusioned again. I was in patrol at this time as a sergeant. I didn't seem to be getting anywhere, you know, I was still in patrol. I had never been out of patrol and I made sergeant and I stayed in patrol. And it didn't seem like the work was taxing me enough now I had my degree. Or I got my degree in the next year anyway, or that summer.

So I interviewed with a company, Bluebell Incorporated, which owns Hicks Ponder here in El Paso. And they interviewed up at the college and then they brought a guy in, a...what the heck was he? Psychologist, but he was a, oh, a manufacturing psychologist, and I forget the proper title for him. Anyway,

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he interviewed me, they interviewed me for about four or five days and they interviewed quite a few people. And he gave me all kinds of tests. I just, I'd never been through so many tests. And anyway, they decided to hire me out of all the people that they talked to. So I interviewed here in El Paso at Hicks Ponder and they offered me a job. And I was a sergeant on the police department. And I turned the job down. Here in El Paso. The engineer, the chief engineer for the company called me about two weeks later from Carolina, who was an Anglo, and offered me, if I would like to go down to Puerto Rico to see another one of their companies and interview with that guy down there and at the company's expense, and they would take me and my wife. And of course I said yes. So I went to Puerto Rico and went in for the interview. And of course they're in the clothes manufacture, they manufacture pants. And I interviewed with the manager down there and he offered me a job almost double my salary on the police department and was going to send my kid to a private school for this and that, would pay all my expenses down there, and right into the executive ranks. So I took it. I went down to Puerto Rico for five months and I couldn't stand the job. Nor could I stand Puerto Rico.

M: What was the problem?

R: Well, Puerto Ricans are dumber than the Americans or the Mexicans. They just don't know how to do anything mechanically. I felt this. I think it was not true. I think I just wanted, missed the States. I think it was a value judgment that I made and it may not've been proper. I missed the States tremendously. Just tremendously I missed the States. I missed going and getting a hamburger. I missed going and getting a steak. I'm a steak eater, I love meat, but I like my steaks good. And they just don't make steaks down there. And the people live differently, they're very slow, the town closes up at eight o'clock and that type of thing, and I just can't function like that.

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The Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico are very passive, contrary to what they are in the States. They're very passive over there, they're very nice people, very nice. A little thick because they haven't been exposed to the mechanical skills that other countries have been exposed to. They depend on the United States tremendously and they hate the Americans. No matter whether you're Mexican American or what, they don't like you.

M: Did you sense any of this toward you?

R: Oh, yes, definitely. Yes.

M: Did they see you any differently from Anglos?

R: They saw me...yes, they did. They saw me differently, but they still saw me as an American. You've got to understand, the Puerto Ricans in the company were not getting the salary I was getting, and I was in training. They had planned to get me right into the management. And yet I was making more than the Puerto Ricans who were already in management as a trainee, because I was from the States and educated here, I guess. And because of my police background I'm sure, too. You know, I was thirty some years old, that's not young. But you didn't talk salaries in the executive ranks, and this is most companies. And I agree with it. But I did find out that one man running a factory, he had over a 100 girls, you know, working in the factory. I was getting more than him and I was in training. Substantially more. So maybe the Puerto Ricans felt this and knew this and they resented it. And I'm not saying I blame 'em.

M: What about from an ethnic standpoint or a cultural standpoint?

R: No, they seemed to accept me more readily there, yes. But I knew I was an American. If you every doubt you're an American, all you have to do is go to a foreign country and you know you're an American. And I'll tell you, Oscar, my wife too. Okay, she's Mexican American, full blooded, she missed the United States something terrible. In fact, I'll tell you, I never wanted to

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come back to the States, I never throught I would miss the United States that much, but I did. I missed the freedoms we have, I missed going to the store and getting fresh milk. You don't get fresh milk in Puerto Rico, very few foreign countries do. The telephone, oh, you know the telephone service is backwards, and everything just started working on my nerves. Puerto Ricans are very slow, they're a little thick, they're happy people, they're not very ambitious, and this bothered me. There were injustices done by the company, and I used to tell the Puerto Ricans, "Well, why don't you tell 'em?" "No, no, we can't do that. We're afraid to." I said, "Well, why in the hell don't you? If it's wrong, it's wrong. Tell them." But you see, I'm coming in with my Anglo aggressiveness that if something's wrong let 'em know. And they used to listen to me, but...I didn't want to become a labor leader or anything like that, that's not my bag. I felt, "Well, if they don't want to say anything, the hell with 'em. If they're happy, let 'em do it." But I couldn't see myself counting the number of times a girl went to a bathroom. Even though I was making lots of money, I couldn't see that.

M: You mean as a supervisor?

R: I'm not geared to manufacturing in an assembly line, if you can understand me. I guess they do it in the States.

M: So you came back to the police department?

R: No, I had studied to be an accountant. So I came back to the States without a job--incidentally, something I had never done in my life.

M: You quite there?

R: I quite without a job. And they didn't have to send me back, either. That was one of the guarantees, you had to stay a year or they didn't pay for it. Anyway, the manager was very good to me, he gave me \$400 and of course I'd saved \$2,000 while I was down there. We lived very good in Puerto Rico, I want

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you to understand. I was right up with the elite down there, we lived with the upper class, had a home in the upper class neighborhood. I made good money. My wife did not have to work. Now my wife had worked all prior to this, as being a policeman didn't pay that well. But even she was willing to come back to the States even though we had all this money. And I had a pretty good shot at a good career there, believe me I did. You know, I walked in the first day and they give me a \$75,000 life insurance paid up, you know. My kid goes to a \$100 a month private school in Puerto Rico, top of the salary. You know, those are pretty good benefits. But I also saw something else with the company. Once they're through with you, buddy, they don't give a damn-- with the Anglo or the Mexican or whoever. You understand what I mean. There's no career, there's no gracious ending to your career. Once you don't produce anymore, I think they boot you out. That's what I got to feeling.

M: You were with the company less than a year then?

R: Five months. But I hated Puerto Rico. Oh, God, I hated it. Never again will I leave the United States to live [/somewhere else/].

M: Did you come back to El Paso?

R: Yes, sir. I wanted to be a policeman again. I missed the police department, incidentally. That's what I missed, but I didn't tell my wife. You see, when I graduated from college, my wife and my family kind of were pressuring me, not knowingly, but [/saying/], "Now you've got your degree and you worked so hard, why do you want to stay as a policeman?" 'Cause the pay wasn't that good. So I got the feeling that I had to do something with myself now because I've got a degree over here in this hand and over here I'm not doing nothing, I'm earning the same pay. So I felt some pressure. Whether I made [/my/] own pressure or they, my family, did, I felt pressure to get out in life and do something more than be a policeman. But I missed the police department terribly

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when I left. I think that coupled with being in Puerto Rico and being in manufacturing all got me down.

Anyway, I came back to the States without a job. I've never been without a job since I'm 16 years old, now. Never. And I've got a family, it's kind of stupid to close a door behind you and not open one before you close the one behind you. I'm a very responsible person, Oscar, I don't like being in limbo. I don't being without security because security to me is a very important thing in life. Pension funds, job security, those things are very important. Time with my family is very important. Anyway, my family is number one, the job is second, I want you to know that, in my priorities. But my wife, as I said, she kind of wanted me to quit the PD, she didn't like me working down here. I was not making very much money and working shiftwork is not the best in the world. Anyway, I came back to El Paso, or I went back to Washington, D.C. first, I have some relatives there. And I'm taking a little vacation now, between jobs. And my brother-in-law was on the cabinet for Spanish-speaking Americans at that time, who's name was Carlos Ruiz, from Los Angeles. And when Nixon was put in, he took him to Washington. He got me an interview with a Civil Service man out there. But I didn't know what he was doing. I thought he was just gonna tell me about available jobs in Washington. So I interviewed with this guy in the morning one day. I brought in all my stuff, you know, resumes and crap, my degree and that stuff. And I interviewed with him and he offered me right there in the office, a GS-12 in Washington. And at that time, I think a GS-12 was pulling down about \$12,000 or \$14,000 [dollars]. Well, that was pretty damn good pay in 1970, that was not bad. I was not making that much on the police department, nowehre, but I was making about that much in Puerto Rico. And he offered me a GS-12 in Washington. And I said, "No way, I wouldn't live in Washington if they gave me \$10,000,000 [dollars] a day."

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I couldn't stand Washington.

M: Why is that?

R: With all those blacks over there and the riots, and Washington, D.C. downtown is like goddamned fortress. Muggings, shootings--too much, too much bullshit. And then travel 40 miles to get to work. And then all those politicians who talk out of the side of their mouth. Mexican Americans as well. Blacks as well. All they want is the money. No one can tell me any different, they're all the same. They all want the money. Everyone I saw out there wants the money. They forget their people out there, most of 'em, 99 percent of 'em. They get to be Washingtonians. I don't want nothing to do with it, nothing.

Anyway, I came back to El Paso, called up a guy that I'd interviewed with, Dick Todar and Phil Stoner in the CPA firm. Called 'em up on the phone on a Monday, went to work the following Monday with 'em as his accountant. That fast. No problem whatsoever, slipped right in. They put me to work and I was gonna sit for my CPA in November of that year. I was really doing well in the company, but I had to come back to the police department. And my wife understood this and she finally came out and told me, "If you want to be a policeman, go back." And I told her, I said, "If I go back, I'm staying there till I die. I'm never leaving again." So I came back, I got reinstated as a sergeant. Incidentally, I was the first Mexican American to get reinstated as a sergeant. I was also the first policeman to get reinstated as a sergeant--Anglo or Mexican American. I went to Captain Islas for help, he couldn't help me. I talked to several people, talked to the commission, and they reinstated me. And I got it back.

M: Why did they reinstate you?

R: Because I asked for it and I had not been gone a year.

M: But this was something new?

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R: Well, no, it's always been in the charter and it's always been in the rules, but nobody had been reinstated as a sergeant. In fact, a lot of people told me I couldn't do it down here. But the Chief of Police and the assistant, Administrative Captain, Captain Harden, wanted me back very bad. And he talked the Chief into it, to bringing me back as a sergeant, and it went through like that. There was some controversy among the men, though, about me getting my stripes, I want you to know that. And I had to fight 'em a little bit--the Association. Anyway, I came back, but I had to relinquish the stripes for six months because there was a problem with the Association raising some hell with me and getting my stripes back. They were trying to go back into somebody else coming back and he didn't get 'em, and my case didn't compare to his, but I knew it and they didn't. That's the way I saw it and so did the City Attorney see it my way. But then I relinquished the first two spots for sergeant and I took the third one, so that was six months later and I got it. And I had a burning desire to do nothing but go up after that.

M: You had your eyes on the top?

R: Yes, sir. Yes, sir, since then.

M: What did you have to do to prepare yourself to get here?

R: I think the preparation started before I ever came on a police department.

M: Started before then. But once you were at that point, reinstated as a sergeant?

R: College changed my whole life. Broadened my views. Made me understand that there's a whole world out there and not just police work and not just one tunnel vision, so to speak. I met a lot of people in college and a lot of them are still my good friends. And some of 'em were liberal. I'm not a liberal. I was considered a liberal at that time. I don't think I'm really a liberal, I'm more conservative. Not that far. But college changed my whole way of life, college was it. Two things that I've done good in this world, marrying my

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wife, raising a family, and college, education. And education, not so much holding up a piece of paper, but learning something when they go to school. And this is something that bothers me a lot. I know a lot of people, I know some teachers at the Community College, and I'm not gonna knock 'em, I don't know if they still do it. Do you teach at the Community?

M: No, UTEP.

R: I understand that there were some of the teachers at Community College were teaching and they could not give a student a D or an F, and they had to drop 'em out of the class or just carry 'em. I taught at UTEP a couple of courses for the Criminal Justice Department, and I believe if a man earns an F he ought to get the F and he ought to fail it. I made an F at college and it's my own fault. I didn't drop a subject correctly. And I didn't earn the F through not studying, I just didn't drop it, and he carried me by not coming to class and he put an F. And I understand I could've changed that, but I left that F there because that's a reminder to me that anybody can get an F. I don't think everybody should go to college either, Oscar. I think there's people up there now that are wasting their time. And I think you got some in your class.

M: Sure.

R: And they're wasting everybody's time. I don't think people have a right to go to college. I think they have a right to walk in the front door and that's where the right stops. I don't think they have a right to be passed and promoted because of ethnic background. And I think the Mexican American is doing a disservice to the Mexicans by doing it. We're graduating people who don't know what the hell they're doing. And I think if they're going to college they ought to study and work. I worked my butt off. I did, Oscar. I worked like a son of a gun. I never took the shortcut. And every time I see somebody that's taking the shortcut, they open the door with their degree but

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then they walk out the back door, 'cause they ain't got it up here, they can't put it together. But I see, and I'm gonna tell you, and I see this, and it started at the Community College, that the Mexican American is opening the doors and promoting bodies. And I think they're doing a disservice. I think it's unfair. They're handing a guy a degree and he doesn't know what the hell to do with it. Do you agree with that?

M: Some of that is going on, sure.

R: Do you thing that's going on?

M: Yeah. It's not only among Mexican Americans, but everybody.

R: Among a lot of athletes, the athlete's another one.

M: Sure.

R: Walk in the front door and out the back. And hadn't learned a goddamn, don't even know what they're doing. We got guys in this department who have degrees and they can't even write. They should've never gotten through English in college. I took Mrs. Walker at UTEP. Do you know Mrs. Walker? Probably one of the toughest English teachers up there, she worked my butt off. I mean she worked me to death. I made a C in her class and I worked a million hours, I think. But I'll tell you one thing, I know how to prepare a sentence. I see guys now and they can't even write, and they have a college degree. They can't even think, they can't even talk. And if I was that college or any other college, I would be ashamed to graduate. Ashamed. And I think the same thing is happening in the elementary and the public schools, too. They're passin' guys that can't say the ABCs, just like the guy I saw from Vilas. Now, I think society did him a disservice, and I think just because he's Mexican American and he's gettin' big, pass him? Bullshit. Let him learn. Why put him out there in the world if you're not gonna give him a shot? And if he can't learn and he can't pick it up, keep him there. And if he doesn't do it

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then fail him. Don't pass him because he happens to be a minority group.
That's not right.

M: That is a problem that exists.

R: I know it is and it's gonna become a serious problem, because you're gonna find a Mexican American with all the degrees is not gonna be able to handle the big jobs. And somebody may be thinking that already. How many Mexican Americans do we have in big jobs today? And how long do they hold them? How long do they stay? A year or two. Think about it.

M: What is your impression of that problem at the professional level here in El Paso?

R: Well, I admire people whoever they are, that I think there's a problem in the professional level in El Paso. I think it's coming out of UTEP and I think it's coming out of the Community College. I think Community College was geared for the lower income people to provide a means for an education. I don't disagree with that, but I think they ought to give 'em an education. And just because they happen to be so and so they can't give 'em an F, that's bullshit. If a guy doesn't come to class and if he doesn't understand what he's doing, and he doesn't try or apply himself, well, he deserves an F. He shouldn't be there maybe. And I think that the standards should not be lowered, they should be raised.

M: That's another issue, standards.

R: I think standards have been lowered too much throughout the country just to accomodate the minority groups. And I think that's a disservice to the minority groups. You want good educated people, you want professional people? Then you give 'em an education. You get a guy that goes to Harvard and you'll see how far he goes. But you get one that goes to UTEP and they don't go quite so far, maybe.

M: I see we're just about of tape.

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R: I have a lot of opinions I guess, I shouldn't get into it.

M: No, that's good. I just wanted to come back to your rise...

R: Oh, on my degree from high school, you asked me about the police department earlier, remember? If I had a degree from high school.

M: That's right.

R: I had the GED.

M: Which is what you get from, the high school equivalency.

R: Yeah.

M: Regarding your ascension to Chief of Police, can you give us your view of how you got there.

R: Okay, yes, I can. As I told you, I was a sergeant on the police department when I came back and my sights were set on this job. Fortunately I got into a specialized service on the police department called Community Relations. That's dealing with the community and minority groups, soothing the police image. I was very fortunate in getting in this. I started to go to a lot of police schools and meeting a lot of people. And I found I could give speeches just like a lot of people can. I found out I can talk to anybody. I've sat down on cans out in South El Paso and talked to people.

M: Was that a revelation to you, or did you know you had those tendencies before?

R: No, I knew I had 'em. I just knew they were there, but I didn't use them. It was not a revelation to me. What was a revelation to me was taking speech in college. I didn't know I could talk before groups. And speech in college almost killed me, but I went through it and I found out I could do it. That's when I learned how to talk, in college. That's why I have to say college was my big change.

M: That's one of the best courses anybody can take.

R: One of the best. And for anybody to skip it is stupid. They ought to make

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everybody take speech, English, bookkeeping. Everybody ought to know bookkeeping, basic. Teach you know to be accountable, where the money's going. Anyway, right there, going into community relations I found out that I had a lot of things on the ball, too. And I from then on I just wanted to make every rank and get here. I'm not so happy that I got here now.

M: You consider it a rapid rise to the top?

R: Yes. If you consider sergeant in 1970 to chief in 1977, that's pretty rapid.

M: How many steps did you go through?

R: Sergeant, lieutenant and captain and deputy chief. But the guy across the hall went faster than I did, Joe Messer. He went up pretty damn fast.

M: What's his position?

R: He's the Deputy Chief now. But he's the one they selected for Chief and turned it down. Well, he turned it down and that's when I got it. He wasn't ready for it, came up too fast. You know, you can do that, go up too fast.

M: But you felt you were ready for it?

R: I felt I was ready for it, but I'll tell you what, it's about 100 percent more work than I thought it was, harder. I'm starting to ease into it a little bit now, but it's one of the most difficult jobs I've ever had, or thought about having.

M: Well, we'd be interested in talking with you later on, let's say in a couple of years.

R: If I'm still alive.

M: Oh, you will be. When you've got more experiences that you could share with us. For now we know that you're busy and we're out of tape, too, so we want to thank you very much for this conversation.

R: See, I was saying before, I talk too much. Oscar, I hope I didn't offend you on saying that about the Mexican American.

M: No, not at all, not at all, oh no.

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