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Interview no. 639

James M. Day

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: James M. Day
INTERVIEWER: Lori D. Lester
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

English professor at UTEP.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical information about growing up in Brownwood, Texas, including education and ethnic relations; views about El Paso, Cd. Juarez, illegal aliens, and the border region.

Length of Interview: 46 minutes Length of Transcript: 14 pages

James M. Day
by Lori D. Lester
August 3, 1978

L: When and why did you first leave your home in Brownwood, Texas, Dr. Day?

D: Well, I left Brownwood in 1950 to go to Tarleton State College in Stephenville, a little military school 60 miles from home. It was my way of more or less escaping the automotive repair shop that my father ran, and I decided I wanted to go to be, really, I looked to be a high school English teacher at the time. And so I went over to Tarleton for two years and took an Associate in Science degree from Tarleton State College in 1952, and then went on to the University of Texas at Austin, where I took my B.A. in '54.

L: Did your father have it in mind that you were going to follow in his footsteps?

D: No, he didn't; he did make a mechanic out of me, but I think largely it was a matter of keeping me out of reform school. He wanted to keep me in sight so he'd know what I was doing, and as a consequence I did learn quite a bit about automobiles and auto repair. I still do my own work on my cars.

L: A good way to save money, isn't it?

D: Yeah, and so, no, he didn't have any notions that I would stay in the business. I don't think that was what he was preparing me for. He was preparing me for work; he taught me how to work.

L: When did you first move to El Paso?

D: I moved out here in September of 1967. I came out here as an Associate Professor of English at the University.

L: Had you visited El Paso before that time?

- D: I had been out here one time in 1961 to a meeting of the Texas Library Association. I was on the executive board of T.L.A. and we had our annual meeting here. And as a consequence we met down at the old Cortez Hotel, which is now defunct. But it was right on the price. I remember that visit very well, although it was only two or three days.
- L: Did you really like it here?
- D: Yeah, I was tremendously impressed, because my friend Morgan Broaddus, who is on the History faculty here, we had been classmates down at Austin. And Morgan, first of all he'd just made a killing at the Santa Ana Park racetrack and had about \$116, as I recall it. Secondly, we went over to the Central Cafe in Juarez and had a tremendously good meal and we played some kind of dice game--I don't remember the name of it--where you threw dice out of a cup. I mostly watched. But I was tremendously impressed with the atmosphere. It was the border interplay that really captured my imagination at that time.
- L: Was it quite a bit different from Brownwood?
- D: Well, from Austin, where I was then living, yes, quite a bit different.
- L: What was it then about the El Paso area that made you decide to stay here?
- D: Well, of course, Broaddus had told me...Morgan was more or less my confidant about things. He told me that if you ever turn into a desert rat, you'll never be anything else.
- L: I've heard that too.
- D: It didn't take long; it didn't even take a year, and I fell in love. I came in September, and by Christmastime I was a desert rat.
- L: Had you been offered some other teaching positions as well?

- D: Oh, yeah, I had four positions to choose from, and that was the time I could choose...when the employee had the opportunity to choose where he taught. So I had three other offers that were equal to the one that I finally accepted here.
- L: But then it was really the location that made you choose?
- D: It was that and the offer of the opportunity to do editorial work for the Texas Western Press that brought me out.
- L: People hear a lot of Spanish spoken here in the city and at the University. Are you fairly fluent in Spanish yourself?
- D: I can read it, because of the training I had in the background, in my educational experience. But I still am not fluent.
- L: You had some formal training, then?
- D: Yes, I had two years of high school Spanish and three years of college Spanish. And Spanish was one of my languages for my Ph.D., so I could read it before I came.
- L: Do you notice a big difference in the kind of Spanish that is spoken here, as opposed to the kind of Spanish you learned formally, the grammar especially?
- D: Well, you talk about here... I guess one of the biggest shocks of my life, and the impression of it remains today, was when I finally woke up...it was down in Parral, Hidalgo de Parral, and I finally woke up to the fact that Spanish was not something to play with, that Spanish was indeed a way of life and not a tinker toy. Because in the Spanish classes I have had, it was more or less an intellectual exercise, and it had not become a way of life. When I was down in Parral I finally met a gentleman who...he didn't explain it to me, he showed it to me,

the fact that Spanish was a way of life, and not something to play with.

L: Have you had any problems in your teaching here at the University or in your personal life having to do with the Spanish language?

D: No, when I travel in Mexico...as I say, I'm not good at conversational Spanish and as a consequence it's the same old thing: I'm reticent to use it until I'm backed into a corner. And when there's no way out, to communicate, then I will revert to what Spanish I know and get my message across. And I can get by...slowly.

L: Do you get many students in your classes that have trouble with English?

D: No, I wouldn't say many. You get a few. I teach the third semester of Freshman English--that's the lowest level that I can go--and as a consequence many of the students with language problems have already been dealt with before they get to me. But still I do get a few of them, and I have to treat them as humanely as possible to get the message across that they must learn English in order to write an adequate research paper. Hardly ever do I get students on the upper level who are having difficulty, where they have any difficulty with English, frankly.

L: What kind of feeling did your education at the elementary and high school leave you with?

D: Well, my goodness. My elementary education was a little country school called Brownwood Heights in Brownwood, and the principal there was Miss Lizzy Bullion. I was one of her favorite students, and as a consequence I got some pretty nice treatment from her. But I recall very vividly a spanking I got on the hand in the second grade, which was a hallmark of things to come. And I recall vividly when I transferred to

junior high school--and one might as well be candid about these things-- I failed the eighth and the tenth grade. I was what you could call a late bloomer. And as a consequence I was almost 20 years old before I got out of high school. I had a distinct sense of what it was like to fail, and indeed found out that I did not like it.

And it was at the end of my first year as a sophomore that I met a teacher who challenged me, a History teacher. Leroy Preston was his name, and he was the first one, the first person to challenge me intellectually. When he challenged me intellectually, then I was able to ride the honor roll for the rest of my high school career. But it had been so checkered up till then that I still ended up graduating in the bottom quarter of my class, and by today's standards would not be allowed to go to college--most colleges, anyway, at least would be on probation. So I had an interesting career in the elementary grades and in the high school, and it left the impression that, one, I had to work for what I got; secondly, I knew the sense of failure; and thirdly, I had also tasted success. And so out of that came I guess a great deal of dogged tenacity that has stayed with me through my college career and my academic career.

L: What was the ethnic population at your school, the percentage? Was it pretty small?

D: Yeah, we were in Brownwood. We were mostly white. Of course they had segregated schools. The black people went to Hardin High School in Brownwood, and the Mexican population was integrated into the...how should I say it? The "normal" educational process. And I had several good friends that were Mexican, though the percentage was extremely

small, maybe one or two percent Mexican American.

L: Were they discriminated against much, that you saw?

D: I don't know. I learned rapidly that you didn't mess with Felix Salazar. You talk about discrimination. Sara, his sister, was in a great number of my Spanish classes, we had Spanish together, but Felix was a big old rawbone sort and you just didn't discriminate against Felix, so I learned a healthy respect in a hurry. As far as discrimination goes, I did not notice it, but then I was too young and naive. I came from the poor side of town, as they did, and so I had a close affinity with them.

L: You were pretty much in the same economic group as most of them?

D: Or lower.

L: Or lower?

D: Yeah, we were poor. And so it was a matter of the north side of town, and they lived on the north side, against the south side. The south side had a wealthier population.

L: Do you as an observer see much difference in the school system of El Paso and this border region, and those of other regions that you might have experienced yourself or heard about?

D: Well, what connection I have had with El Paso Public Schools has been mainly through the teachers. Because in 11 years of teaching here at U.T. El Paso I have had a number of the teachers in my classes, and on occasion have been asked to go down and make talks to their classes, and such things as that, and have given in-service training to the teachers. What I notice about the El Paso schools has to do with their in my mind excellent facilities. I know there is a lot of complaining about it, but they ought to see what I had.

- L: Are you talking about the school buildings, the...?
- D: The facilities, yes. As far as the operational conception goes, all I can judge is by what students we get. And for some reason about four years ago, five years ago, we started getting a group of students who were not strongly trained in English, and this seems to be turning itself around for some reason. I don't know what they are doing to do it, but I do see an improvement in the last couple of years.
- L: Do you feel that the school system here is fairly comparable with most throughout the nation?
- D: I suppose that the attitude on that, that the attitude that permeates the region, one of placidity, would apply here as well as in contrast to other places--that is, the neighborhood, the community of El Paso, is more placid, is not as aggressive as, say, Austin was when I lived there. And as a consequence, life is more pleasant. And I'm sure that permeated the educational system as well as the aura of the community.
- L: I read some material from some authors that say it seems like a lot of teachers expect a lot less from their Mexican American students, and that therefore these students tend to live up to their teachers' expectations and not perform quite as well as perhaps the Anglo children might. Do you think that applies in this case, with such a large percentage of Mexican American students in the school system?
- D: I have had...it's a rather interesting thing. I had a student who queried me on this some time back, as to how Mexican Americans do in my classes as compared to Anglos. And on the freshman level, it turns out that Mexican Americans did not do as well number-wise as the Anglo Americans, and I can only attribute that to a difference in acculturation,

and a difference in home attitudes, perhaps. I don't think that the teachers of the public schools demand any less; it has to do with the fact that in graduation there is no degree of gradation made on accomplishment. And so if I were putting the blame on the difficulty of preparation of a Mexican American as opposed to an Anglo American, I would say that the problems would be more within the home and with the culture background, with the fact that the curriculum is designed for Anglo Americans and their--our--training and our mores.

L: Why do you think so many students of Mexican background choose to study in the States rather than in, say, Mexico City or elsewhere in Mexico?

D: Oh, I would attribute that very easily to, one, family ties, and two, to economic opportunities. You're talking about Mexican Americans or from Mexico? Either one?

L: Mostly Mexican students from the interior of Mexico who come up to study.

D: Well, they come up here, yeah. They come up here because the upper levels of education in Mexico do not reach to the heights that American educational institutions reach to. And I'm sure the parents as well as the students seek the intellectual challenge, the economic opportunity that might present itself later. This is mainly what I see.

L: Do you think part of it might be because their family might be closer to the border, or it's easier for them to come up than to cross down into Mexico City?

D: I would think not. I don't know the percentage of students who we get from, say, Hidalgo de Parral, but I know it's fairly high; we get quite a number of students from Parral. And I attribute it mainly to the

economics, and to the intellectual challenge. No, I don't think it's a matter of geography at all.

L: What political events of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries would you consider to be the most important, or of the greatest influence on this border region? Any that stand out in your mind?

D: Well, of course, it's the same old thing of the Mexican Revolution; it jumps right at you. The two battles for Juarez--Cd. Juarez--and the interplay of the border, the fact that many of the Mexicans who were escaping Mexico at the time of the Revolution settled in El Paso as a way of just getting out of the country, and yet retaining some cultural ties, a degree of safety but not isolation as such. I think the Revolution and its aftermath. I think of the difficulty that existed in the 1930s over Prohibition, how easy it was to get alcohol across the border; make it in Mexico and sell it in the U.S. I think that had some bearing. I think also, though, the meaning of the river, the Rio Grande itself, cannot be overlooked as a way of life in regard to the nineteenth and twentieth century, and the building up of the Chamizal and that difficulty, by the river changing its course. And then the meeting of...oh, when was it that William Howard Taft, president of the United States, came down here and met with the Mexican president, that big meeting. Those things jump out at me immediately. I imagine that if I thought about it, I'd come up with something else. There's a great deal of interplay, as of course the sociologists tell us and the historians, too, back and forth across the border.

L: Who are the main Mexican folk heroes?

D: The one that jumps out at you is Pancho Villa. Everybody knows about

Pancho Villa. And he of course was the beginning of it all. How did that go? I heard an expression the other day that if you would explain Mexican history, you would do it with the leg of Santa Ana, the arm of ...Cardenas? Who was it? Carranza? Was it Carranza who lost an arm? And the smile of Pancho Villa, I believe it was. And that's the way you'd corral the history of Mexico, in those three folk heroes.

L: Do you feel that the Mexican population is given a sense of pride in the learning of their own folk heroes, or are they pretty much under-rated?

D: I think my experience with that would reveal that the Mexican people simply are not interested in their culture to any deep degree so far as recording it goes. I'm pretty certain that they're interested in it, that they have an interest in what they were and what they come from, but I'm not sure they have any interest in recording it, either on tape or in book form.

L: Hasn't there been a recent effort to do that more?

D: Well, yes, but it's so infinitesimally small compared to the reservoir that's there that it hasn't really made a dent. And I think you could still plod the streets of Juarez and not get too far on getting someone to record their background, belief, and history. I think you'd have a great deal of difficulty getting them interested in it.

L: Do you think that there's a big difference in the lifestyle of Americans in the area of the boundary with Mexico, and of those living in the region of the Canadian border?

D: Yes, a great deal of difference, which I attribute to climate. I think the climate of the north is more vigorous, and requires a more vigorous way of life, and as a consequence you have a more vigorous

people. I think whereas on the border we do tend--this applies to Anglo American and Mexican American alike, and Mexican--that we tend to languish in the sun and the heat, and as a consequence I think it sets a different pattern in the pace of life.

L: Why do you think that the border with Mexico seems to be so fluid with so many people crossing, whereas on the border with Canada we don't have the problem of illegal aliens and so many people crossing every day?

D: It has to do with economics, I think. Canada, for instance, is more economically equitable to the northern United States, their economies are more closely cued, whereas on the southern border, you have such a different attitude toward government between the Mexicans and the Americans that a real difference exists in attitude and beliefs. And as a consequence, the thrust of the Mexican to gain a better economic position is to cross the border and come north.

L: What about illegal immigration? We all hear a whole lot about it, about how it destructs economics in El Paso and surrounding regions. Does it?

D: Well, I might be a little prejudiced here, but, no, I don't think so. I'm not too concerned about it, but then they haven't come after my job yet. And so when it gets to where the illegal alien comes to get my job, then I might feel threatened, but at the present I do not see any great difficulty, no. America has always been the land that accepted all comers, up until about 1929 when they imposed the Immigrant Quota system. And the Immigrant Quota system, the immigration problem is a result of that system. So they built the system as late as 1929, and I don't know what would happen if a bunch of Mexicans infiltrated America.

It's been done ever since America began. And I don't see it as a major threat.

L: You don't think it's maybe not a major but an important source of the unemployment of the, say, lesser skilled workers?

D: It probably is, yes; it probably is a source of difficulty there, in the immediate El Paso region. It probably is. I would agree to that.

L: But you don't really feel like we need to get any tighter controls or hire more Border Patrol people?

D: I don't think that's the answer to the problem, particularly, because all you're doing there is creating more of a police state. The way to stop it if you really want to stop it, the first thing to do is build a big fence, electrify it, so nobody will touch it. And that'll stop it.

L: Along the entire border?

D: Yeah, yeah. There's no other way. You can't stop it any other way. And even then, folks will still find a way.

L: And what do we do about people boarding ships and sailing around?

D: Yeah, yeah. Well, you can't stop it, but you sure could put a dent in it, if you did that. That's the only way. Otherwise, it will remain a problem.

L: Do you think that the economy of the El Paso region would be vastly different if this illegal immigration were to come to an end?

D: Yes, I think the cost of living would go up substantially. Yes, I really do. Those marginal tradesmen you're talking about, those marginal workers would have better wages, and as a consequence I think less work would be done. And as a result the price, the cost of living, would go up.

- L: So you and I would remain on a constant wage scale, whereas the price that we'd be paying would go up.
- D: Yeah, for that kind of work, yeah.
- L: Many U.S. citizens like to cross the border to visit, sightsee, and shop and whatnot on the other side. How frequently do you, or have you, gone into Mexico?
- D: I would say that my average is about, oh, once a month, I probably go over there. I go over there to get a haircut, and enjoy it thoroughly. I've been going to the Soltero brothers for 11 years, ever since I got here. I go on a liquor run, I go over to eat, maybe once a month.
- L: Do you usually go with friends?
- D: Yes, it's always a social occasion. If there's no social occasion, I'd hardly ever go. Back when I first moved here, for the first three or four years, I used to spend hours riding down the streets of Juarez, and I used to buy a lot of things over there. It got to where it was such a hassle to cross the bridge coming back, on the American side, that I finally gave up going. To spend 30 or 40 minutes waiting in line was more than I cared to do. As a consequence I quit going, because of the American immigration officials.
- L: Is it better now, then?
- D: Yes, it has been the last two or three years.
- L: Why?
- D: I can't really say. Maybe that now I know the peak hours, I stay away from them. About 2 a.m., I just come right across.
- L: Do you see that as a pretty important source of recreation for American citizens?

- D: It's definitely an attraction. I don't know how many of us avail ourselves of it as recreation, but it's definitely an attraction.
- L: Do you plan to remain a permanent resident of this border region?
- D: Yeah. Nobody has made me a better offer of late, so I reckon I'll hang around.
- L: If you could, what kinds of things would you most like to change about the city?
- D: About El Paso or Juarez?
- L: Yeah, what things would you like to change?
- D: Goodness gracious. Off hand, I guess I would apply it to my own school. It's a story that Bailey Carrol once told me down at U.Y. Austin. We were walking across in front of the tower down there. Bailey Carrol was about 6'4", a tall, lanky Texas, with a hat and a big cigar. He looked down at me and smiled, and said, "James, there's nothing wrong with this campus that a dozen first-class funerals wouldn't cure." And I think that our own campus is coming to about that extent, it would take about a dozen first-class funerals. But he added quickly, "And let me do the picking." I don't think of much else. I don't think of much that I would change about El Paso. I like the rustic qualities of it, I like the streamlined aspects, I like the freeway system, I enjoy the mountains, tremendously enjoy the mountains.
- L: How about the weather?
- D: The weather suits me all right. A little warm in summer, but not bad, not enough to dabble with it. That's about what I know. I wouldn't change a great deal about it. It's just Carl Sandburg's Chicago on the Rio Grande. That's about what it is.
- L: Okay. Thanks a lot!