

7-19-1984

Interview no. 661

Ben A. Parker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utep.edu/interviews>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Interview with Ben A. Parker by Douglas V. Meed, 1984, "Interview no. 661," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Oral History at ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Combined Interviews by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Ben A. Parker
INTERVIEWER: Douglas V. Meed
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 25, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 661
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 661

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in 1913 in Waelder, Texas; joined the Border Patrol in 1944; retired in 1975.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Border Patrol training; experiences working as a Border Patrol agent in El Paso, including several anecdotes; situation along the border today.

Length of interview: 1 1/2 hours Length of transcript: 25 pages

BEN PARKER
by Douglas V. Meed
July 25, 1984

DM: This is an interview with Mr. Parker at his home at 160 Baywood Road in El Paso, Texas on July 25, 1984. What year were you born in, Mr. Parker?

BP: 1913. [I'm] 71 years old.

DM: You said you were born in Waelder, Texas?

BP: [Yes], Waelder, Texas.

DM: When did you join the Border Patrol?

BP: 1944.

DM: What reason did you have? Why were you interested in the Border Patrol?

BP: I was in the Army stationed in Camp Blanding, Florida. There I saw my first Border Patrolman. I was [an] acting MP working Datona Beach, and there was a Border Patrolman there. I talked with him and I guess I liked his uniform, and his appearance. When I was discharged from the Army about two years later, I made application and was accepted.

DM: Where were you first stationed? Where did you first go?

BP: Well, I was sworn in in San Antonio, Texas and sent to El Paso, Texas. My first assignment was here in El Paso. I was here almost 6 months before the school started - the Border Patrol Training School.

DM: How long a training period did they give you?

BP: It consisted of Spanish, immigration law, naturalization law, fingerprinting and then physical exercise. Immigration law and Spanish were the two top subjects.

DM: Had you known Spanish before?

BP: No, it was really starting from scratch.

DM: Did you find you picked up Spanish more from the school or did you learn it by speaking with people?

BP: Well, your basics were from the school, which was a big help with the people that you come in contact with. Most of them just spoke Spanish. I worked with a Spanish-speaking Border Patrolman. He was a New Mexican and he used to tell me, "Learn one word a day and you'll make it." And that works pretty good.

DM: Did he speak Spanish with you all the time to help you learn it?

BP: Well, no, not all the time, but most of the time.

DM: Were you mostly concerned with illegal immigration or was smuggling involved in your responsibilities?

BP: I guess illegal aliens, at the time that I came in, was the number one.

DM: Did you spend most of your time here in El Paso?

BP: No, I was here only about 6 months. During that time I was transferred over to the Santa Fe Street bridge as acting immigrant inspector.

DM: What were your duties there?

BP: I was assigned to the deportation section. We would pick up aliens from the consulate here in El Paso. At that time many of the aliens served their sentences in jails like Silver City and Deming, New Mexico and various other jails nearby that were federally approved. We'd pick up the aliens and carry them back across the river. The title was Deportation Detention Section or Detention Deportation Section. I picked up some good experience in that section that helped me later.

DM: Did they put aliens in jail before they deported them, or was the jail holding them until they could be deported?

BP: Yes, they served their sentences in various jails here in El Paso Sector. We kept them full just about all the time.

DM: How long did they serve?

BP: Say 6 months to a year.

DM: They don't do that anymore, do they?

BP: Well, I believe they can, but they use their own facilities now, including La Tuna.

DM: I just wondered, since there's so many, whether they just shipped them back?

BP: Well if his record required deportation, I guess they can make the time he has to serve the shortest they see fit and the shortest they have space for them. But once an alien is deported he's got a bad record. He can't enter within a year without permission from the Attorney General, and if he is apprehended again after deportation, well, the charge is much greater.

DM: Do they actually bring a person to trial?

BP: Right, sure can, and he can be sentenced up to 2, 4, 6 years. It begins with a deportation hearing.

DM: I wondered if they ever did that in these cases.

BP: Oh yes, oh yes. La Tuna has a good many up there sentenced 18 months to 2 years that's been deported many times.

DM: Did you run into any of these fellows several times in the course of your being on the bridge there? Did you see the same faces a few times?

BP: Oh yes, a good many of them.

DM: What part of Mexico were most of them from back in the 1940s?

BP: Well most of them were from border states.

DM: What states in this country were they working in primarily?

BP: The states along the Mexican border

New Mexico - that's where the big majority are today.

DM: Are more illegals going up into the North now?

BP: Oh yes, oh yes.

DM: I understand some are now trying to get into other than agricultural jobs in this country. Is that a change?

BP: It is a change, but that is the pattern now. Farming doesn't take the laborer, the male laborer it once did. They have cotton pickers and they can operate these ranches with very little manpower. They don't have cowboys or very few cowboys. They have pickup trucks and jeeps and they don't have the work for them.

DM: When did you retire from the Border Patrol?

BP: Eight years ago in 1975.

DM: Have you seen many changes over the years? How were things different in '75 then they were when you started, as far as illegal traffic was concerned?

BP: I guess every year from 1944 the illegal alien traffic increased.

DM: Did you see any change in the kind of people? Where were they from in Mexico? Were they coming further from the interior?

BP: They did come from further within. The old style wetback that's just like the old cowboy, you don't find him anymore. I have to say that most of them were honest, reliable people. They were hungry and just wanted a job. When they told you something it was true. But that isn't true today. I recall one time we apprehended a bunch, say 12, 15, that we couldn't haul in the car at one time. So we'd load up the car with 7 or 8 and tell the rest to wait until we got back. When we got back, there they'd be. But today, you turn your back on one and he's gone. So there's a difference. And another thing that I've observed, they claim that Mexico is poor over there. Sure, they don't have what we have over here, but today they dress

better, they are healthier, and very few that can't sign their name. Most of them can read and write. Back in 1944 there were many, many that couldn't sign their names, they'd make an [X] mark. But you don't see that anymore now. So, at our expense, Mexico has made progress.

DM: Did many of them come across with wives and children or were there mostly just males coming across?

BP: Mostly males. But in towns like El Paso families did come over. But I'm talking about working at my beginning, then we didn't have many families move in.

DM: I have read about "coyotes" bringing people across. Just what is a "coyote" type of operation?

BP: A smuggler of human cargos. He makes the arrangements in Mexico to bring them across over here. Generally he's with them until he collects the money and puts them on their way over here.

DM: How far do they take them, usually? Is there a pattern?

BP: Generally the arrangements are made, in this area, in Juarez. He'd bring them from various points in Mexico. Then he comes over here and makes arrangements for a car to pick them up and a place for them to cross and to meet the car.

DM: Does he pick out an area along the river to lead them across?

BP: Right, right where they can be picked up handily. He might bring them to a hotel over here, a tourist court.

DM: What kind of money does he get from them? I guess over the years it's changed. But, what would the cost be, say in the '40s, compared to how much you'd get now?

BP: Well, there's really no comparison. We didn't have so much smuggling in the 1940s.

- DM: They came over on their own mostly?
- BP: Yeah, most of them on their own. This smuggling of aliens has been in the last 10 or 15 years. We, the Border Patrol, now have an anti-smuggling unit that does nothing else but handle these smuggling cases. We have some smart guys handling these cases. They really have to be sharp. Some of them work the other side of the river. They have to.
- DM: What kind of people are these smugglers? How are they different from the average wetback? The average wetback, I guess, is just the average fellow looking for a job?
- BP: That's right.
- DM: Are smugglers more a criminal element?
- BP: Yes he is. He is a criminal. He is a criminal because he takes their money, generally all that they have. He couldn't care less what happens to them on this side. And many of them, you know, have died in vehicles, where the driver of the vehicle was a "coyote" or someone hired by him. He gets scared and just leaves the whole bunch to dry up and die in the back of a van or something. Many, many lose their lives like that.
- DM: From suffocation in a van?
- BP: Right, right. Dehydration, no food, no water.
- DM: They just abandon them on the side of the road or out in the desert? Have you run across vehicles where any of them have died?
- BP: My partner and I--this was about 1946, or 1947--get information on a truck that was supposedly hauling bales of hay from Fabens. There was just a skeleton row of hay stacked around the outside of the truck bed and it was hollowed out on the inside. We followed the truck and finally stopped it on the other side of Kent, Texas. We

asked him (the driver) what he had in there, and he said nothing but hay. It was about 2:00 o'clock in the morning. We had flashlights and we started probing the outside of that hay with them, and they went right through it. They were en route to Pecos, Texas. It was in September, and you know it's still pretty hot. Well, we pulled them off the side of the road and started pulling the bales of hay apart so we could get to them. They were wet with perspiration, and when that cool air hit them it was just like pole axing them. Down they'd go. So we got a big bunch of automobile tires, set them on fire, and that stopped them from shaking so much. But they were in pretty bad shape. In fact, the doctor told us if they'd been in [the truck] 45 minutes longer in that hot hay, some of them would have died. [There were] 29 men and one woman in the truck.

DM: Stacked in pretty close?

BP: In a semi, you know. Another time...now these when we got to them, they were dead. They apparently died from asphyxiation in the trunk of a car. When the car got past our road block which was near Sierra Blanca, maybe Van Horn, I don't remember which, the driver later stopped this car and found the two men dead. The smuggler, [apparently] to make it look like an accident, drove down to the railroad track and pulled them out (bodies) from the trunk and placed their bodies up on the rails, and the train just ground them up.

DM: When was that?

BP: Oh, that must have been somewhere in the early 1950s.

DM: Did any of them ever get lost out in the desert?

BP: Well, I don't know if you'd call it getting lost 'cause they knew where they were going. Sometimes they'd get weak, probably thirsty,

and if they could get to a ranch house, well, they'd rest up a few days. I know we went out one time in a snow storm. A rancher had called and told us an illegal alien (we called 'em "wetbacks", and I still do) had come to his house and said his feet were frozen. I know it was one of the worst snow storms that I've ever seen in this country. We went out and picked him up, loaded him in the car. His feet were frozen. Blood was seeping from under his toenails. They were black and swollen. We brought him into Sierra Blanca, Texas to the doctor there. He said, "Well, I'll give him some morphine to ease the pain." "But," he said, "you'd better go to El Paso with him." So we brought him up to the county hospital there. Of course, they had to amputate two feet, but he did live.

DM: What was he wearing, just an old pair of shoes, or was it just that freezing cold?

BP: Freezing cold, and he had a burlap sack wrapped all around his feet. Course he did have pain, but he didn't know where it was from. It cost Uncle Sam about \$30,000.00 [dollars].

DM: The operation and everything?

BP: Yes.

DM: Where did they return these fellows when they caught them? Did you just put them across the bridge or what?

BP: Well, many of them, yes. Mexico has something to say about that. And we try to satisfy them, you know. Most of them are put back here in El Paso or Ysleta, Fabens. For a good many years here we had the bus lift to Presidio and we had a plane lift to the interior of Mexico. Then we had a boat lift, too. That was the one that they dreaded.

DM: Is that right? Where did that go from?

BP: Well, I really don't know just exactly where it originated but it went to Veracruz. Most of them were from the state of Sinaloa, along the border. They didn't like that. I was in charge of the El Paso-Presidio bus lift for, oh, a long time. I don't believe that's in operation anymore. It may be, but if it is I don't know about it.

DM: You loaded them up here and drove them to Presidio?

BP: Right.

DM: And they went across the bridge there?

BP: We carried them across the bridge. I'm sure that's stopped. We carried them across into Mexico about 12 to 14 miles to the depot, the train station. [The train] goes from Ojinaga to Chihuahua. We'd get down there about daylight and carry them over in the big buses over graveled roads. They were forty to fifty thousand dollar buses.

DM: When you crossed the border did you have Mexican officials accompany you in the bus? Did the Mexican officials get in the act?

BP: Yeah, but they didn't accompany us in the bus. After a few trips down there, we didn't see many Mexican officials. Saw some soldiers... they're the ones that kinda herded the bunch when we got them to the train station. We'd open the bus doors, and they were gone. We met Mexican officials at the Port of Entry at Presidio on this side and of course we han a manifest with the number of the aliens, and was cleared for entry.

DM: After you put them on the train, where did the train take them?

BP: Chihuahua.

DM: Did they take them out of Juarez by train?

BP: Yep, they'd take them to the same place, Chihuahua, then they'd branch out from Chihuahua. That kind of transportation helped. They couldn't come back like tonight, or tomorrow.

DM: Was this worked out with the cooperation of the Mexican government?

BP: Sure. You had to have their cooperation in just about anything.

DM: What was their attitude when you were dealing with them? Was it indifferent, cooperative or hostile?

BP: Well, kind of indifferent. You couldn't say hostile. One time I carried some ammunition, [the] Chief in El Paso suggested we give it to some of the Ojinaga policeman. That didn't work too well, there wasn't enough ammunition to go around. The ones that didn't get the ammo didn't like it, so we stopped that. It makes me sick to read in the papers two incidents recently where they chased an alien across the bridge, maybe [he was] a U.S. citizen, I don't know. [He] was a drunk driver, you probably remember that, and they detained [the American police officer] over there and embarrassed him. Took his gun away from him. I can remember the times here in El Paso that they'd get after somebody over there and run [after] him [over] on this side. They'd be right behind him shooting at him in the United States. We'd fall in [to] help them catch the guy and [get him] back across that river. We thought we were supposed to help.

DM: Would they reciprocate anytime in the past?

BP: Yeah. Sure they did. We had a good thing going till now. I don't know what...a real good thing going. You know where Park Street here is?

DM: Yes.

BP: Well, at that time, wasn't [anything] but the old Peyton Packing Company down on the river.

DM: About what year?

BP: Oh, it was in the early '60s, late '50s, I guess. I heard some shooting taking place, I looked and saw a couple of guys running with two Juarez policemen right behind them.

DM: Shooting at them?

BP: Yeah, sure. So we drove ahead of them and caught the two guys.

DM: There was a little informality in exchanges there. [Did] you look the other way about extradition?

BP: (No answer)

One night at the Old Santa Fe Street bridge, this was just before the giveaway down there, near midnight, I saw a circle of guys and I knew something was taking place. I drove over in my little old jeep and I parted the crowd, and I could see one of them had on a holster and he was trying to tell them in Spanish that he was a Mexican officer. A larger guy was on top of him, and I mean he was clobbering him. So I pulled my gun and poked it in his ear and told him to get up. He did, of course, and he recognized me (as) being a border policeman. He yelled, "I surrender to you, sir. I surrender to you, sir." And I said, "Well, ok, then." So I handcuffed him and put him in the back end of the little old jeep I was driving and helped the officer get up. He was pretty well beat up. He was a plainclothesman and I asked him where his gun was. He said, "I really don't know, but I had [it when] we were scuffling down next to the river on [the] U.S. side." He said he must have lost it. By that time my partner had arrived on the scene. My partner and I loaded

him in one jeep and the thief in the other, and we found that pistol down there (by the river).

DM: On which side?

BP: Our side.

DM: Our side?

BP: Yeah. He wanted to get it back, you know. We didn't give it back then. We just pointed out that we had his pistol. So he said, "Can I have it back?" I said, "No, not right now. You go back on the other side and get your buddy over there, or get somebody, and go down to the Stanton Street bridge. Come back on our side and I'll have it there for you." Well, I talked to the thief and he told me that he had been deported two or three times. I asked [the thief] where he last served time. He said Florence, Arizona. I called our office for a record check on him. I wanted to be sure [he was] a Mexican citizen. He didn't want to go back. He said, "They'll kill me if you put me back." I said, "Well you were trying to kill that officer, wasn't you?" He said, "No, I wasn't trying to kill him." I said, "It looked to me like you were." But anyway he went back. I don't know the outcome, but I know everyone was happy along the river for a few days. From the other side, you know. They'd [Mexican officers] wave and come down to the river and talk. But you [don't have that anymore] -- good, bad or indifferent.

DM: What do you think has caused a change in their attitude?

BP: Well, probably civil rights.

DM: Did you often find when you stopped any of these fellows that they could speak English? Did they claim to be American? Have papers?

BP: Oh, yes, sure. Some few could speak good English. One night, this was down at the same place [where] a lot of incidents happened,

we watched this guy come across the river. We were watching him with binoculars, and we just followed. When he got three or four blocks we were still following him. He started talking to some people on the corner of a street, and we were trying to find out what the guy was trying to do. The crowd kept getting bigger. I don't know what kind of sermon he was preaching, but anyway he was getting pretty good crowds. So we went in there and apprehended him and spoke to the crowd. He didn't like it. It kinda embarrassed him when we stuck him in the back of that little jeep and started driving off. So in English he pointed over to us and he said, "(expletive deleted) Poncho Villas. (expletive deleted) Poncho Villas." We told him to shut up. Our headquarters was on Hammett Street, and a short cut would be to go by the old Peyton Packing Company to get to headquarters. So that's the way we started out with him. Of course it was dark, and he didn't know the country. When we got down a little past Peyton we decided we'd talk with him a little more. I guess the guy thought we were fixing to beat up on him, which we were not. He started to tell us in perfect English, "I'm just a smart-aleck so in so." He said, "You know what I am. I'm a newspaper man. I was deported in New York City 3 times."

DM: Was he trying to get a story or something?

BP: No, no. He was just a smart-aleck. He told us, "I'm just a smart-aleck. You embarrassed me. You didn't come up to me and ask me any questions. You just come up and got me by the arm." Well, I said, "We watched you come from Mexico. We didn't have to ask you anything, we knew." He said, "I figured that out."

(At this point the tape ran out. The interviewer was however, unaware of this.

In response to a question about locating illegal aliens in the rugged terrain of West Texas, Mr. Parker states in some areas the terrain was too rough for vehicles. He recounts times when he pursued "wetbacks" on horseback. Horses, he recounted, had a good eye for spotting people at a distance.)

[PAUSE]

DM: You were saying that the horses could spot the aliens faster than you could? It'd sort of twitch a little? Perk up his ears.

BP: Yeah, they sure would. They could see those aliens before I could. There's a place out northeast of Sierra Blanca. I know the guy that was working [there]. We were good friends [and he told me there were some illegal aliens in the area]. When I drove up of course they ran. I think there were just 3 of them. Two of them I found pretty close [by]. The third one just kept going. So I brought [the 2 of] them back and handcuffed them to my vehicle. The guy there at the corral said, "Why don't you take my horse there. He'd catch that guy pretty quick." So I said, "OK, I appreciate it." So I got on this horse. I'd been working traffic check that day and I had on my dress uniform. The stirrups were too short on the saddle, but anyway, I followed his track. The old horse was just as calm as could be. Well, this "wet" had crawled up in the forks of a dagger.

DM: A dagger? What is that?

BP: That's a cactus tree. I had one foot out of the stirrup because it was too short. I was leaning over to see the tracks on the ground, and all of a sudden this horse jumped out from under me. I hit on my elbows and knees and my gun [flew] out. I didn't know what happened. I shook my head and kinda looked around and there that "wet" was, up in the tree forks. He scared that horse. If he'd have laughed, well, I don't doubt, well, I believe I'd have scared him. But he got down out of the tree while the horse walked on. He (the "wetback") got out of the tree and went after my horse and brought him back. I sure messed up my elbow, my knee and my dress uniform.

DM: How many miles had you gone on horseback?

BP: Oh, maybe a mile.

DM: When you left on foot did you have to track [the first two] for [a] very long distance?

BP: No, the two of them hid, but this third one, the one that kept going, well you can figure he didn't want to be caught. He probably had been deported [before].

DM: Did you have any water when you went after them on foot? Did you carry canteens?

BP: Oh yeah. But I didn't at that time. [It] wasn't far from the corral [where] there was water. But yes, we'd always carry plenty water.

DM: I guess you'd be in bad shape if you got out there two far without any water.

BP: Sure would. I never picked up a "wet" in my life that wasn't thirsty. In the summertime the first thing they want is water.

DM: What was their attitude when you found them? Were any of them hostile or did they ever try to resist?

BP: No, not hostile. I can just recall one occasion that an alien wouldn't stop. I walked up aside of him and put my hand on his shoulder and he jerked away and started running. Anyway, he was a little hostile and took a little persuasion. He was a Mexican soldier. Still had on his uniform.

DM: Did you ever think any of them were dangerous when you stopped them?

BP: Well, yes, that went through my mind a number of times. But the more you handle them the more careless you get because 99 out of 100 are just hungry people looking for jobs.

If they got caught, they just got caught. They always have trusted the Border Patrol. I've had them want to give me their money to send to them in Mexico. They were afraid that they'd take it away from them in their own country.

DM: Did they give you an address in Mexico?

BP: Oh yes, but I never did accept any of their money. I'd tell them I couldn't do that. But if they had a check, I would try to help them cash it because they had trouble cashing it in Mexico. They had to pay too much to get it cashed.

DM: What'd they have, a check on an American bank?

BP: Yeah. I guess we gained their trust by not ever taking any money away from them. They did trust the Border Patrolmen.

I never let an illegal alien think that I was in any way trying to help him. But I'm just human, a heart specialist to a hungry person. And I have fed thousands. Made them a sandwich out of my lunch. I always carried a lunch. For 31 years I carried my lunch and I still like lunches...still like sandwiches. At one

time I could buy them food. Whatever I paid out of my pocket I was reimbursed. That still can be done. We have a fund for that. [If] one of them tells us he's hungry, the first thing we'd do is call the camp. When they send after him they'll bring a sandwich to him. That is something the public don't know anything about but that's what happens.

DM: Are most of the fellows in the Border Patrol sort of as you were, feeling a certain sympathy for them?

BP: Well, yes and no. Most of them would feed them. My sympathies didn't go to them for being over here. I couldn't afford to be. They've violated our laws. It was my job to stop them. Yes, some of them I helped. Some of them I let stay a week or ten days, because of transportation problems.

DM: Were you ever injured on duty outside of the horse bit?

BP: No, not really. I never was injured from a wetback. I guess I was pretty fortunate.

DM: Have many officers been injured?

BP: No, not many.

DM: What about "coyotes", would they put up resistance if they were caught?

BP: More so than the average illegal. They're in the same category I'd say as a bootlegger or rum runner. I've been mighty lucky.

DM: Did you do much work at night?

BP: Yes, I put in more hours at night than I did in the daytime.

DM: Did you have stake outs on the river?

BP: Oh yes.

DM: Catch them coming across in the evening?

BP: At night. In fact there's more entry at night than there is in the daytime by far.

DM: Did you work shifts at various times?

BP: Yes. 4:00 p.m. - midnight and midnight to 8:00 a.m. Later at night the criminal type wetback comes over here to rob, steal, rape, etc.

DM: They were mostly going into El Paso weren't they? Just trying to do something here and get back across?

BP: Well, certainly they were trying to get to a heavily populated area where they could get lost. It might be Denver, Tucson, Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio. That's where they were going. In checking farms and ranches, when ranchers say, "There was a couple of guys by here two days ago. I tried to hire them and they told me they didn't want to work," you can figure they were two that we would have liked to have caught. You're taught by older officers not to take any chances ever. And we'd profit by their advice. Just don't get too careless. They're not violent people, but don't get too careless. And you don't have too much to worry about. But people are going to get killed, I don't care what they do. In most cases it's carelessness. Like I recall an experience that was really carelessness from my point. My partner [] and I [] caught up with ten or twelve in a bunch and (in) taking a short cut to our vehicles we had to cross a fence. Well, I was much younger and lighter than I am now, so I hurdled the fence but I jumped out from under my pistols. And I didn't notice it. I didn't even feel it. Then one of the "wets" picked it up, walked up beside of me and said, "Here, this is yours."

DM: Did you ever have an occasion when you had to pull your pistol?

BP: Well, I have pulled it several times. I don't know what I accomplished

by it, but I'm still alive. And I didn't have to kill anybody.

DM: What kind of a situation was it?

BP: Well, one time I was trying to load them in a vehicle. I had 7 or 8, and had the doors open and was trying to push them in. I think they decided if they could grab me [they could get away]. One of them grabbed me, but I got my gun.

DM: Did he grab you by the arm?

BP: Round the waist. Around my back. He'd have grabbed my gun, man, I don't know. He expected others to help him, I'm sure of that. But I guess he was the only one that...

DM: The only one that wanted to take a chance?

BP: Yeah. Anyway, I fired a shot or two into the ground and they thought they was hit but they wasn't. But I didn't have any more trouble with them. You'd have to know this guy, he's a helluva good guy, name was Jim Tice. He's dead now. But he was from Tennessee and he came to El Paso and started working in a bank downtown. And he saw the Border Patrol around and he just had to join the Border Patrol. So he got in the Border Patrol and he made a pretty good officer, a pretty good officer. So one night I got a call on the radio. I was in my little old jeep as usual. He gave me a call and I was real close by him anyway. He didn't know it. He was on Santa Fe Street at the electric company building and I was just turning in on Santa Fe Street. He called me by my name, "Say Ben, I just shot a joker." I said, "OK, I'll be right there." By the time I had him in sight, I saw this guy standing out by the side of the Scout. The guy was standing there and I drove up and there was blood dripping from his chin. Old big Tice, he said, "Ben, I don't know why he don't drop. I drilled him right in the chin."

So I walked around 'cause I recognized the guy. I handled him once myself, and he recognized me. We were old friends and he was glad that I was there. But I looked at his chin and it was part of the steering wheel stuck [in his chin]. You see, that's hard rubber. And old Tice was riding co-pilot and he pulled his gun--the boy walked up to the side of the jeep with a screwdriver in his hand, he shouldn't have, particularly with old Tice. He pulled his gun, [fired, and the bullet] hit the top of that hard rubber steering wheel, and it just splintered. And that's what hit the guy in the chin, stuck in his chin. It looked like a black hole, sure enough. And the guy he wasn't so sure he wasn't shot either. And old Tice's partner got a concussion from that gun. Like to scared him to death. Yeah, "Just shot a joker." Old Tice.

DM: How do you think affairs are going now on the border? Are they getting under control or out of control?

BP: Well, yes, its undermanned. There's so much frustration among the Border Patrol. It makes it hard for them to do a decent job. They pick up ten and thirty come in. It affects a person. He'll soon lose interest in his work. When a Border Patrolman loses interest in his work he might as well retire and get out of it when you go to feeling sorry for yourself. The spirit of the Border Patrol is not as high as it was when I was in and I think that is the main reason.

DM: What are some of the things that might be done to make the Border Patrol more effective?

BP: Well, I don't think they need any new laws passed, just to enforce the ones that they have. We need the manpower and ways to detain them. Nobody likes to go to jail even...

DM: What about equipment? Do they need more planes or vehicles, or what do you think?

BP: Equipment, we have enough equipment for the manpower. It don't look good to me. It don't look good to me at all and I'm worried. I just read in the afternoon paper that President Reagan, and I'm for this 100%--now I'm not for amnesty--'cause he wasn't going to sign the immigration bill that's pending. Did you read that?

DM: No. I haven't. I haven't seen a paper this afternoon.

BP: He would go along with the Senate version but absolutely wouldn't sign the House [bill]. You see in the Senate version, amnesty doesn't cover near the number of people that the House [bill] does. I believe [amnesty is granted to those persons residing in the U.S. since 1977], but the House, your know, made it 1982.

DM: People who had been in the country before 1982 would be legal, is that it?

BP: Yeah. And then after 1977. I don't think that any force in the world could process that number of men and control the Border at the same time. Because it's going to take some doing to process... they're going to try everyway in the world...They haven't been here but a week, you know, they're going to try and make you believe that they've been here since 1977. Some of them are going to have records showing that they've been here since '77, but they'll be false records, you know, records of somebody else.

DM: Would the Border Patrol be responsible for processing all of that?

BP: Who else could?

DM: Well they don't have anywhere near the people to do that kind of a clerical job.

BP: Nope. Well, not necessarily a clerical job. It could be worse than that. You might have to carry the guy to his house. Or go where he's working, which you wouldn't be very popular there. You know in 1954 the Commissioner of Immigration was Joseph P. Swing. He was President Eisenhower's friend. I guess the strength of the Border Patrol then was about twelve or fourteen hundred. Now that's the whole Mexican and Canadian border. We started this drive in California. But the news media and radio and TV told them (illegal aliens) you'd better get home, the Border Patrol's going to be here and they're going to get you. Thousands left and went back on their own. We were divided up into twelve men task forces. We hit California. Kinda blitzed California. We got a lot of help from the local authorities. Everybody was trying to help us. That was in 1954. We went from California to South Texas and a few larger towns like Las Vegas. We got a good many "wets" out of Las Vegas. Most of them worked for the railroad and a few around the casinos in Lake Tahoe. Most of them were around San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Chula Vista, and Yuma and Tucson, Arizona, and El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio, Texas. We wound up apprehending over a million aliens. That was in 1954. I'll tell you how effective it was. Up in the 1960s, now, you couldn't hardly catch a "wet" over here in El Paso. In '54, '55, '56, Swing got the money and he hired a bunch of men. New Border Patrolmen. And they thought for a while, you know, they might lose their job. Because you could work all day here in El Paso on a shift and not catch over one and some didn't catch any. Just think of that. That's hard to believe, but that's the truth. But it didn't stay that way long. It didn't stay that way long. Pressure groups, politics...

DM: Do you think there are a lot of groups that want the aliens to come across?

BP: Why, sure. Absolutely.

DM: What would some of those groups be? Would they be employers?

BP: Any of these Hispanic groups. They want members. And if a "wet" stays over here long enough he's going to be a number eventually. You know that.

DM: Are they looking for a political base?

BP: Right. That's one reason. I think that perhaps is the main reason. They're all fighting this immigration bill. They're afraid of discrimination against people who would hire them, who would turn them down because they're Hispanic, Mexicans. But I don't believe that's true. I don't believe that's true. And I guess there's this identification - they don't want that. I can't see why. We all have identification.

DM: Do you think there are any employer groups that want them in for cheap labor?

BP: Right, right. But they are not organized. I don't know. You know, farmers and ranchers used to be the main source of wetback labor. But it's not that way anymore. Now the bars, the laundries, any kind of business, they think they can't get by without them. And families where both spouses are working and they have children, who are they going to leave the kids with? In most cases one spouse can't buy a home and pay for it today, man and wife are going to have to...

DM: You think the Americans are using them for maids and baby sitters?

BP: Oh yes, baby sitters. I'm not a racist by any means. Some of the best friends I have are Mexicans. Good friends. But I don't know. I wish I knew. I'd go tell them that there's going to be trouble. There's going to be serious trouble. It's going to be kind of like the Civil War. Brother against brother. Cousin against cousin.

DM: You think that will come from too many people and not enough employment?

BP: No, that'd come from...because there's not enough employment to go around for the illegals and the legals. There's where your problem is going to be.

DM: You think there will be trouble between the Mexican-Americans and the immigrants?

BP: Right. The illegal Mexican.

DM: Do you find any growing hostility there?

BP: Yes, yes. More. You find a little more of it now.

DM: Beyond a question of not enough jobs to go around, do many Mexican-Americans feel that the illegals are keeping the salary and wages down because they keep labor cheap?

BP: Sure, that's the reason..that's here in El Paso, you know. And these border towns, that's where the trouble's going to be. And if the people [who] are away from the border in the interior [of the U.S.] knew about this, maybe something could be done. But millions of people in the United States that live in states away from the border don't even know there's a Border Patrol and don't know there's any immigration problem. They read a little in the paper, but they don't know.

DM: It always seemed that [the Border Patrol] was one of the services that got very little attention outside of the border areas.

BP: It's beginning to get a little more now I think than ever before. This Simpson-Mazzoli Bill has been publicized quite a bit, its pros

and cons. But still, you know, if you live in a community where there are no wetbacks, you just don't know, you don't know what they're talking about. And they're strong. Hispanics are strong. If they weren't strong you wouldn't see Reagan in San Antonio today.

DM: Do you think some of the leaders are not in touch with their own people on this thing?

BP: Right. It doesn't look good to me. Something's got to give. You know and I know that our old statue of Liberty has been overly generous in the last 20 or 25 years. But today the guests have outnumbered the hosts. You know what I mean. And the party crashers are taking over.

DM: Do you think the country is getting too full?

BP: Too full, absolutely, that's it. Absolutely.

DM: Have you ever been up on the Canadian border and dealt with any of their problems.

BP: No, I haven't been. They don't have the problem up there that we have here. Of course, they have illegal entires and they have Canadians working over here, but they kind of get lost and they're just not the numbers. I'll tell you something about the Border Patrol. During the war the Border Patrol handled the PW camps here. When that bunch of Japanese were apprehended in California, Arizona, most of them were farmers. They were interned, most of them, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. They has internment camps in Ysleta that housed Italian POWS, and at Fort Stanton, Germans. But the Japanese that I worked with were in Santa Fe. I was discharged from the Army in 1943 and came right into the Border Patrol.