

9-9-1984

## Interview no. 694

María Elena García Connolly

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 María Elena García Connolly by Debra García, 1984, "Interview no. 694," 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](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Maria Elena Garcia Connolly  
INTERVIEWER: Debra Garcia  
PROJECT: History of the University  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 9, 1984  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
TAPE NO.: 694  
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 694

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Member of refugee family during the era of the Mexican Revolution; attended the College of Mines in the 1930s.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Why her family had to leave Mexico and come to the United States in 1916; settlement in El Paso; her schooling at St. Mary's, Loretto and El Paso High; her attendance at the Texas College of Mines; work as a teacher; some Mexican American graduates from the College of Mines and their careers; professors; sports; dances.

Length of interview: 1 hour Length of transcript: 27 pages

Maria Elena Garcia-Connolly  
by Debra Garcia  
September 9, 1984

G: At this point I'm just going to ask certain questions, a little biography. When and where were you born?

C: I was born in Aguascalientes, the capital of the state of Aguascalientes in Mexico, on August 18, 1914. And I was two years old and my brother was six months old when we had to come all of a sudden to the United States.

G: Who had to come to the United States?

C: My father, my mother, my brother and myself.

G: What was the reason for you coming to the United States?

C: My father was Superintendent of Railroads in Aguascalientes, and one evening all of a sudden one of the workers came in and said, "Don Felix, Don Felix! Villa is sending men to kill you!" My father said, "Well, why would he want to kill me?" And then the man said, "There is a very wealthy miner and rancher in Zacatecas also named Felix Garcia, and he heard that you were here and he is sending some men to shoot you immediately."

So we got our things as quickly as we could. I couldn't take my maid because certainly her father wouldn't let her go with us, so my mother and my father carried my brother and myself. My brother was very young so he didn't give trouble. I was two years old so I had been used to my maid. So all the way from Aguascalientes to Juarez, I cried. Now, my parents did not have transportation so they came in the cattle car, and there was no place to sit. And the minute my mother sat down even on the floor of the train, I would begin yelling and crying, "I want my nana, I want my nana!" And then my mother would have to walk back and forth, back and forth with me. Now, I wasn't very little, so when we got to Juarez, my mother developed phlebitis from having to carry me back and forth.

Now, there was no money and my father got another job at the railroad in Juarez, but his only hope was that soon we would be able to come to the United States.

G: When did you come to the United States?

C: We came to the United States on Halloween, 1916. And my mother thought that this place was crazy--all these kids dressed in black like witches costumes running back and forth on the street. My mother said, "What in the world is happening?" So one of my aunts told her, "Oh this is la noche vibre. It's Halloween." So, well, she finally was able to kind of console herself.

First we lived in Juarez in a little boardinghouse, and my father was just gathering money enough to come across. So we came across on the streetcar, and then at the end of Myrtle Avenue, one of my aunts met me and the cousins. They were all older than we, and they took us to their house that was on Magoffin. Oh, it was around where Cristo Rey is, it's on Cotton and Magoffin, and we lived there for a while. My father wasn't working on the railroad now.

G: And your mother was a homemaker?

C: My mother was at home. As sick as she was, washing by hand, doing everything that she had never done in her life, because my father and her mother had always had servants.

But my father also sacrificed. He got a job at the smelter, and to economize he would walk from Magoffin Street every morning to the smelter and walk back. He could not spend any money. And when he got paid at the end of the week or the month or whatever it was, he would give my mother the money in gold coin. They paid them in gold coins, and my mother would get the money for the rent and get the money for food and everything. And of course she would go to church as often as

she could. She couldn't always go every day because she was so busy at home.

G: Now what school did you attend here, what elementary school?

C: When I was six years old my father and mother decided that I was going to Saint Mary's. By that time we lived on Texas Street on the 900 block. We moved, we lived on Texas Street, and my mother wanted me to go to Saint Mary's because my father said that he would see the Sisters there and that the children seemed very polite and very nice. So I went first to Saint Mary's, 'cause my brothers were younger than I.

I spoke no English. Then my mother decided to take me on the first day of school. She dressed up very pretty, because even if I do say so, she was a very handsome person. She dressed very pretty in a black taffeta dress and a black hat with a black feather. She looked very handsome. And she took me to school. In those days one paid a dollar a month for tuition. Well, the Sisters said, being as I spoke no English, my tuition would be three dollars. Oh, incidentally, at that time my father worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad. And so Mama paid...the books were extra and I think it was six dollars altogether. I think I learned English in a month. It was a case of necessity. I was the only Mexican child in the whole school.

G: Sink or swim.

C: So, no other way, I just had to learn. Now, my pronunciation was pretty strange, but I corrected it as I went along. I remember in the third grade we were drawing pictures, and I had wanted a picture of a Chinese man that I had seen. And I asked my best friend, "Give me the Chee-NE-sě." You see, I had seen it written, Chinese, but how was I to know to pronounce it? (Chuckles) So, I said Chee-NE-sě.

G: What high school did you go to?

C: El Paso High. Now, wait. I went into the first grade. Then being as I knew my letters in Spanish, my pronunciation, and I knew how to add and subtract, I was passed not to the second but to the third grade. Then I skipped the fourth and went to the fifth. Then I was in the sixth and seventh. When the law changed, grammar school ended at seventh grade.

When I graduated from Saint Mary's I received a scholarship for Loretto. By that time my father had bought a house on the 3700 block on Montana, which was really not very far from Loretto. When we moved to Montana Street my mother said, "Now, what am I going to drive?" Because she used to take us to school, she used to walk us to school every day. But when we moved to Montana Street, well, my mother said, "Now, how am I going to see? Are the children going to school on the streetcar or what?" And my father said, "No, I'll buy a car." So he bought a car, an old Chevy, and my mother learned to drive. To be able to pick us up at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, she said she would take an aspirin because she would get so nervous to drive by herself. And she would drive, and I think she was the first Mexican woman to learn to drive a car on her own.

G: I hear you (laughs), in that day and age.

C: I went to Loretto one year. But it was during the Depression, and my mother and father both told me, "Elena, it costs a lot of money to go to Loretto, even on a scholarship. You have to have clothes when you don't wear uniforms, you have a lot of money that you have to donate, you have a lot of raffles and things like that. So, I'm sorry, we can't send you to Loretto next year." I cried and cried.

G: You wanted to go.

C: But I had to go to El Paso High, which in a way wasn't so bad after all.

The only thing was I promised myself, "If I ever get married and have girls, they're going to go to Loretto."

G: Now, I understand you attended Texas College of Mines. Now, how old were you at that time?

C: Sixteen. In fact, Myss Liles, my math teacher, used to say there ought to be a law against admitting people that young.

G: Was there some sort of resentment against you?

C: No, no. And then she didn't mean what she said. It was just that I had done A work in Trigonometry, and when I went into Analytical Geometry I was a total flop. In fact, I was promoted with a D-minus.

G: This was in high school?

C: No, no, at the College of Mines. No, at high school I took all the hardest courses you can imagine. I took Chemistry, I took Biology, I took four years of Spanish, two years of French, two years of Latin. I used to go every summer to school, and worked at the White House after school and on Saturdays.

G: You had plenty to do.

C: Oh, I had a lot of energy. (Chuckles) And I must have been a strange kid because how many children would want to take all those courses? But I seemed to have been hungry for them. I don't know why. I was a strange kid.

Anyway, I graduated not with any unusually high honors, I just graduated, and I went on to college. In those days college was not expensive. My father gave me a hundred dollars and said, "Go register." I registered, paid my student activity fees, bought all my books for Chemistry and Math, Spanish, English--and had money to take home, about \$40 dollars worth. (Laughs) So I gave my father the \$40 dollars and he said, "You got all your things? You don't need anything else?" I

said, "No, this is it." He said, "Fine." So, I went to school that year and I did all right. I made As and Bs. I made an A in Trigonometry, made As in Spanish, and I made an A in English, the freshman year, the first semester.

G: Did you have a favorite professor? Did you have a particular professor that really stood out in your mind?

C: Mrs. Fineau, who taught French and Spanish, was my favorite teacher. She was a darling. You see, there weren't many Mexican girls in those days in school. But she seemed to take quite a lot of interest in me, especially since my mother and father would take me to school every morning and wait there in the car till I finished, because by that time my father didn't work anymore. So my father would go there and wait, and my mother, and they would read the newspaper and read their favorite books while I was in school. So, even though I was not very brilliant, I was not pretty, I was not the best-dressed girl on campus, but people noticed me because there was this girl, nothing unusual, and had her father and mother waiting for her every day.

(Laughter)

G: What was campus life like then?

C: Well, I didn't have much because, you see, my father and mother were waiting for me. So the minute I got out... That was my only year that I went to school all the time, that I was a college girl.

G: Okay, now, "all the time" as in, throughout the day, you were there throughout the day?

C: Well, sometimes from 8 o'clock in the morning till noon. And I would have lab on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I believe Tuesday was Chemistry and Thursday was Biology. But to take two sciences the same year?

G: That's very hectic, very hectic. What did the classes run like? If



you took classes on Monday, did you have those same classes on Wednesday and Friday?

C: Monday, Wednesday and Friday was the way they ran. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. We went to school on Saturday.

G: Saturdays too.

C: /Yes./

G: How many classes did you generate? I mean, did you take 12 to 15 hours a semester?

C: I guess it was fifteen. Because, let's see, the first year I took Spanish, English, Math, and two sciences. Five.

G: Okay, now those were your basic classes. At that point for about a year you took day classes. When did you start night school?

C: Now the next year my father lost his job around May, and so we had no mode of income except the savings we had. And we were praying and praying that somehow somebody would get a job. My father was over 50, so there was no chance of his getting a job. Then, oh, I took also Education. I also took the first year of Education.

G: The first year?

C: Yes. And in those days you did your practice teaching the semester of the first year, and I had done my student /teaching/ at Beall School under Belle Foray, and she was an excellent teacher.

Anyway, when there was no one else to work, all of a sudden I remembered, "I already took student teaching. I'm going to apply for a job." Well, they looked at me, Mr. Hughey, and shook his head.

G: Mr. Hughey.

C: Mr. Hughey, K. H. Hughey.

G: Now, there is an elementary school here in El Paso.

C: Named for him. Mr. Hughey was a precious person, a very nice man.

Anyway, I had to have the job. So when I went and made my application they told me, "Sorry," but they couldn't employ me because there was no place for me. However, at that year they opened Dudley School.

G: There weren't any available positions at that time.

C: But they opened Dudley School, and they had to fill it up with teachers. So now there became a couple of places at the other schools with teachers that had been substituting before and all that. So, poor Mr. Hughey must have said, "Get that girl out of my sight." (Laughter) I was there for two weeks every morning and every afternoon.

G: You were diligent.

C: I was going to get a job regardless. So I just sat there and waited for him. So Hughey would come out and say hello, he would leave and say good-bye. Finally, he must have said, "Get that girl out of my sight. Give her a job." So I went to Aoy School. And then when I signed the contract, I was 17, so my mother had to come.

G: So, you only went to school in actuality for one year.

C: Yes.

G: So I guess the requirements were at that time, after student teaching you could work.

C: Yes. That was the last year. After that they required a degree.

G: Now did you have to go back to school?

C: Boy, did I go back to school.

Well, at Aoy, they decided they'd give me a class. It was a high first, and they gave me everybody nobody wanted. I had children from seven years old, mostly boys, to one that had just gotten out of reform school that was eighteen.

G: So you had all age levels.

C: Oh, everything, a mixture of kids. And I was too young to really

realize that I really had my hands full.

G: Yes, you did.

C: But Pablo must have had a good heart, because whenever the kids began getting rambunctious, he would look at them, give them a piercing look, and everybody became quiet. (Chuckles)

G: It worked.

C: Being as Pablo's last name was Garcia and mine was too, he must have felt akin to me. Must have said, "Poor old gal." (Laughter)

G: Okay, now you taught at Aoy for how long?

C: Twenty-five years.

G: When did you go back to school?

C: Oh, I went back to school every afternoon.

G: While you were still working.

C: Yes, while I was teaching. I would go back to school. I would go to classes at 4:30, 4:30 to 6:00, and then take another one from 7:30 to 9:00. Now, my mother didn't come for me or anything, and I really didn't have any money to eat supper, but I didn't care. I just stayed there and studied. And in those days I couldn't buy books because they were so expensive, so we would borrow books at the library. Say for instance I would borrow a book and return it the next day, I would borrow a book overnight. Now, for the 4 o'clock class I would study it from 6 o'clock till I went to the other class. I would read it and take notes, read it in the library. Then for the other class I would take the book home overnight and return it the afternoon the next day.

G: So that worked fine for you at the time.

C: Yes, then I was young. I was 18 by that time and I was able to get my citizenship papers. I wasn't even a citizen. (Laughter)

C: And employed in the United States.

C: I tell you, our Lord must have been right there guiding me.

Anyway, I got my degree in 1937, yes, which was not much later than the rest of the kids that I had gone to school with. In fact, Dr. Broom was teaching a senior class while I was still teaching, and he took a class of seniors to visit my class to see what a good teacher could do. And I was so embarrassed I lost my voice.

G: That was a very stressful situation for you.

C: Sure it was. All the girls and boys that I had been to high school with, and college, were there. They were waving at me. I opened my mouth and I couldn't say a word. So, the kids were very nice. They looked at me with sad eyes. Then I said, "Let me go outside and get a drink boys and girls. I'll be back in a minute." So, I just went outside and got a drink and said a prayer, and came back and taught my class. And I taught reading mostly, because that was my subject that I loved to teach.

G: At school, being that you said earlier that there was not a large amount of Mexican American students period, were more male than female?

C: No, much more. But then the males were engineers, mostly engineers.

There weren't any academics. Oh, if there were, there were one or two that nobody respected anyway because they weren't engineers.

(Chuckles) And this was a primarily engineering school. So the boys who were engineers would look at these other guys and curl their lips at them, like saying, "Poor guy, you can't do anything else."

But I kept going, and then I graduated. And my principal, Kathleen Gorbitt, went to my graduation. And all my friends like Florence Strandberg and Lula McDaniel--they're all respected teachers--they went to my graduation and they hugged me and they hugged my mother.

And they said, "Mrs. Garcia, we know Elena couldn't have done this by herself. It was you that pushed her and that encouraged her." So they all hugged my mother and kissed her 'cause they all thought she was such a wonderful person, which she was. And that was in '37.

And I kept teaching at Aoy through my marriage in '42, and I kept teaching there and I loved it all the more because those kids were the nicest children, and studious, and they loved their teacher. I had one or two little rebels but we tamed them. Now I meet most of those boys and girls, some of the boys are engineers, some of them I see in church every Sunday. And they still call me Miss Garcia.

G: Oh, out of respect.

C: Yeah, and they say, "Yes, Miss." (Laughter)

G: Did you ever feel any sort of bias or prejudice because you were Mexican?

C: No, I don't think so. I don't think I had sense enough to feel it. Because my brother says that there was a lot of anti-Mexican thought in those days. But I got a job when a lot of people didn't have it. Somebody said, "You must have denied you were a Catholic." I said, "Nobody asked me if I was a Catholic or not." In fact, one of my best friends that had been at Loretto and was my best best friend, I noticed her mother didn't speak to me anymore. And one day we were sitting down after mass and she came to me and says, "Elena, why did you denounce your religion?" I said, "I did not. Nobody asked me if I was a Catholic or not." She says, "Well, somebody told me you had become a Baptist." I said, "No, no." But I didn't have sense enough to know that anybody could be saying anything against me or anything. I just never thought of it.

G: Were there at the time any available scholarship funds?

C: No. Oh, I used to borrow money from Gene Thomas, who was an engineering professor. And say, for instance, I would borrow \$25 dollars in September to be able to register for my two classes, and then I would pay him my first payment...at the end of September I would go and give him the money. But this wasn't done through the office or anything. This was done through he and me. He would give me a check.

G: Very generous, very generous. Did you live at home?

C: Always. Always. Well, it was in '42 I married, I married Tom, and 10 months and two days later we had our oldest daughter.

G: Were there any observed traditions that you noticed that made Texas College of Mines very different for you?

C: Oh, well they used to have St. Patrick's Day rush, you know.

G: What was that like?

C: All the engineers were supposed to take the freshmen up to Oro Grande and put them through some kind of hazing. And I had no way of knowing that first year. About three or four years later I knew about it because my brother was one.

G: So he went through the hazing process.

C: He went through the hazing project so that he was burnt. They tried to scare them with some kind of acid, the kind of acid in vinegar.

[They] got the acid and they were going to put it on them and let them smart. But some smart cookie, some smart senior, said, "Vinegar, my foot. Acetic acid, my foot." So, they put a little tiny drop of sulfuric acid. Perhaps it wasn't such a tiny drop

because my brother's face burnt to such an extent that after the blistering and everything, he was pulling off the skin and it was pink. What's left underneath was pink and fresh, very raw. And some of the mothers were going around saying they would sue the school for allowing the hazing that was against the law anyway. But my mother, not being a querulous person, said, "No, no, no, it isn't so bad, is it?" And she asked my brother and my brother said, "Oh, let it go, Mama." So we did, nobody sued. But it did happen and it was terrible.

G: Now, I guess since most of the students were not of Mexican descent, English was the primary language spoken.

C: Oh, yes. Nobody spoke Spanish even among... Later on when I went back there were some Mexican kids, but nobody spoke Spanish.

G: Not at all?

C: Not at all.

G: Was it forbidden?

C: No, no. I think we would have felt, well, like I would anytime. Say for instance I'm with a group of Anglo kids, do I go and talk Spanish? What for? I know the language.

[ PAUSE ]

G: What was it you were going to tell me?

C: I've always wanted to make a point of this. I have never heard of a teacher punishing a boy or a child for speaking Spanish in the room. Now, we didn't allow it, but that was for their own good. If they spoke Spanish all day, in fact they spoke Spanish at home all the time, when would they learn English? So, I would tell them

even after it became practically unlawful to let them speak English, totally English. After I taught 25 years at Aoy, and when I went to Hawkins School, that was when they began talking about the bilingual education. So I told them, because some of them would say, "Miss, you're a Mexican. Why don't you let us speak Spanish?" And I would say, "That's why. Because if I let you speak Spanish, you speak Spanish at home all the time, so what will you do? Will you ever learn English? When you grow up you'll go to someplace and they ask you something in English, and you'll just open your eyes wide and don't know what they're talking about. And they'll say, 'Well, what in the world did they teach them in school?' This way, now it's up to you. You can have yourselves transferred, or you can have your parents come and bawl me out for teaching you only in English. But for your own good, I'm going to teach only in English." And they all agreed.

G: And they learned the language.

C: And they learned the language. But you see, it was a mutual understanding. Now, I've heard kids say that they were punished if they spoke Spanish in the halls or anything like that. Now, I did tell them if I'd see them in the halls speaking Spanish, I'd say, "Speak English." And for the longest time I'd do that, but it was for their own good. I didn't get anything out of it.

G: For their own benefit, definitely.

What became of a lot of the people that you knew there at the University?

C: Oh, well, listen, during the war, World War II, there were a bunch of



them that accepted the translation jobs, reading letters that the government was afraid had something against the United States, and they said that there were quite a few of them. Now, I never would accept a job like that although I could have. In fact, it was offered to me. But I knew that government jobs come and go and I could not have a government job, I had to have a steady job.

G: Now, the translator's purpose was to read the letter and decipher what the meaning was?

C: No, to see if there was anything hidden behind the lines or there was anything there, and if there was they would...I don't know that they did but I imagine they would write the name of the person down and to whom it was mailed, and they would cut the pieces out.

G: So, a lot of them became translators.

C: Became translators. Now, Margaret Lopez wrote a book for American students learning Spanish, and I think it's called Hablemos Espanol. And let's see, Angela Ornelas became math teacher at Annapolis, because she was such a good math student that I remember Captain Kidd, the head of engineers, would say, "What a shame to waste a brain like that on a girl."

G: That's a shame. So there was obviously the double standard that was evident.

C: Oh, yes, definitely. But she was so brilliant in math. And the last I heard about her after World War II was that she had been teaching math at Annapolis.

Now, who else do I know that made themselves well-known? Josefina Escajeda became Spanish supervisor at one of the universities of

California. I don't remember whether it was Berkeley or Southern California. And she married one of the professors there. I can't think of anybody else, but I'm sure there were quite a few of us.

G: And they were good friends of yours at the time?

C: Yes.

G: What were the education classes like?

C: Oh, they were...(chuckles).

G: (Laughs) You laughed.

C: They were fine, but all you needed, I think in my opinion, is one year of it. One year of Education, of Childhood Psychology, and I think every other class is a copy thereof.

G: Why?

C: They don't teach you anymore than that. They just repeat it and repeat it and repeat it.

G: It's become too redundant.

C: Yes, much too much. In fact, I always thought that one Education course, one year of Education, was quite sufficient. Another year of Child Psychology of the preschool child. And another thing. You can teach a child both languages at the same time. When I was in college I had a Mrs. Bertha Reynolds as an Education teacher. She insisted you could only teach a child one language at a time. Well, I argued with her and argued with her. And I think she finally gave me a C when I could have made an A or a B, but that was beside the point.

G: What class was this?

C: In an Education class. It was one of those first Education classes that I took. But she said that, she said that it was a shame to

teach a child two languages because they became fluent in neither. And they would always have an accent, they would have an accent for the Spanish and an accent for the English that would never be understood in either one. Well, I knew better because I spoke both the English and Spanish. Well, after I quit arguing with her we got along fine.

Well, now, when I got married and had my daughter, Patricia, when she was about three years old, by that time she knew both languages, because my mother spoke no English; my husband, her father, spoke no Spanish. So she learned both languages, and she didn't mix them up. Because I remember my mother and I had gone out on an errand and we left her with a maid. And when I got home she says, "Mama, a man came." I said, "Was it English or Spanish?" And she looked at me and I said, "Was it like Grandmother talks or like Daddy talks?" She says, "Like Daddy talks." (Laughter) So you see, she didn't even have an idea.

So I've always taken my children to the library because I think it's good for them to see books, even way before they learn to read. So, I was in the children's department at the Main Public Library when Mrs. Reynolds came in and said, "Oh, hello Elena. How are you?" And then she looked. She says, "Is that your little girl?" I said, "Yes." She says, "Hah, I bet you're teaching her both languages aren't you?" I said, "Of course." She says, "I don't believe you." I said in English, "Patsy, go over toward the table and bring me the little blue book, not the top blue book but the second one." She went there and says, "This one Mama?" And I said, "Yes, that one."

[Mrs. Reynolds] said, "Now, do it in Spanish." And I said, "Niña, ve y traeme ese librero que está ahí, traémelo para acá." "¿Este, Mamá?" "Sí." "Aquí está." Then I looked at her and she said, "I don't believe it." She turned around and walked off, didn't even say, "I'm glad you did," or anything. She just turned away and walked off. But I did it. (Laughs) Which I knew I could. A lot of my friends never taught their children Spanish because they said that would ruin their pronunciation. But I did. All my children are bilingual. Because they had to talk to my mother and they had to talk to their father, so what else was there?

G: Do you remember any of the Education professors that taught at that time?

C: Mrs. Reynolds and Puckett.

G: What did each teach?

C: Mrs. Reynolds taught most of the Education, say for instance, Childhood Education. In fact, when I was doing my student teaching, she was the one that would go with the supervisor, who was Mary Claire Horde, and the principal of Beall School was Myra Prater Clark, the toughest principal that you can imagine. I didn't have any sense, I didn't know she was. But I understand that during World War II a boy came in to deliver a telegram for some of the teachers, and she spanked him. (Laughs) The messenger boy! Because she thought it was a boy that had been sent there for punishment to the office, and she just gave him a licking. (Laughter) That was the funniest thing.

G: And you said Mrs. Puckett?

C: Mr. Puckett was also an Education teacher. He taught the junior and senior level. Because see, I was only able to take a few Education [courses]. And since I didn't think I was going to stay in Elemen-

tary Education, my major was French, Spanish and a minor in English. So, I was going to teach in high school any of the three subjects. I had made As and Bs on all of them. So, I had only taken two years of Education and then I never took any more. I spent my time in English, Spanish and French, being as I had had my math. Now, I had had my science the first year, I didn't have to bother. So I just piled up in French and Spanish and English.

G: What year did you graduate?

C: '37.

G: In 1937. What time of the year was it?

C: May. May, 1937, at the end of the school year.

G: Did you ever want to go back and continue?

C: Oh, yes, I did most of my Master's work. But most of my Master's work was done before I married in '42.

G: And your Master's work was at Texas Western?

C: It was College of Mines. College of Mines, yet. And all I had to do was my thesis, I had all my courses. And then they said that if you were teaching in grade school, you'd have to major in Education. So, I went back and took two courses, but by that time I had gotten older and I had a bunch of kids at home and I thought, "I have to know those children. All I do during the school year is come and say, 'Do you have your homework? Show it to me. Do this over. It's messy.' And I never have a chance to get to know them." So in the summer we'd go on picnics and we'd have a study period. We'd do math, we'd do English, we reviewed some of the grammar rules. And, oh, we would have a great time. It was just simply wonderful the way I got

to know them. And we'd go to the library, we'd go to the museum, we'd go just everywhere that anybody would want to go. We just had a wonderful time.

G: So you were very close to graduation and you didn't complete the thesis?

C: No, I didn't complete the thesis, because like I say, I thought, "Well, what am I doing going to school and doing all that and have the kids." My mother would take care of them but it wasn't the same. Right now I've heard since they grew up, especially from the youngest, that she wishes I hadn't worked. I said, "Well, you stayed with Grandmother and Grandmother was just the same." She said, "Mama, it wasn't exactly the same." And I had thought that I had gotten away beautifully, that I had gone to school and worked all my life, gave them dancing, gave them piano, had them go to Loretto from kindergarten though high school, But there was still that little resentment way back in there, that I wasn't home. And only from Katy, because the rest of them would say, "No, it's all right Mama." But Katy was the only one, and she was the youngest.

G: May be the reason.

C: Maybe there is.

But one of my friends said, "Ask Katy to come over," because she had gotten married and had a child and she didn't know whether to come to teaching or not. So, she invited both Katy and myself to lunch and she asked her that, she says, "Did you miss your mother working?" And she said, "Yes." And I looked at Katy so surprised because I didn't know she had. She said, "Yes, I did Mama. I wish you hadn't worked."

G: Varies from child to child, though, that's the thing.

C: Yet, you ask them nowadays, "Did you have a happy childhood?" "Oh, yes, Mama." "What about the trips your father and all of us used to take in the summers?" We'd go to New York every other year in the car. When the first two were born, we used to go by the train, but we'd have to get a special bedroom, because we had two young children, Patsy and Tommy. And by the time Tessie came, the third one, we couldn't afford half the train. It was too expensive. We would have had to have a share, some stock in the train. (Laughter) So we bought a car and we went in the car. Oh, we had a good life.

G: Is there one last thing that you want to say about education?

C: Girls, be sure and get educated. There's nothing like an education even if you don't have to work. I have a lot of friends, especially my daughter's friends, that have married well off, that have married doctors and lawyers and they don't have to work. But they're educated people even though they don't use it. But their conversation is intelligent, they teach their children intelligently. Girls, always get an education. The boys, of course, better, because they're support. But the girls, if they don't have to support a family then do it for yourselves and for your children, really.

[ PAUSE ]

G: What were sports like at the College of Mines?

C: There was a football team that played Austin High School (laughter), and Austin beat us! But the Austin players were good players. Among them was Victor Blanco, that's a doctor now, and oh, a whole bunch of them. But I remember that. Not very good. Now, that was all I

remember. I'm sure maybe there were some other...I think there was mostly beer busts. I think they were mostly beer busts.

G: Did women participate, or was that just strictly a male oriented thing?

C: Oh, male oriented.

G: No females?

C: No, no, no, no. Maybe some tough little girls would go with them, would go in that bunch, but no self-respecting girl would go.

(Laughter) Another thing, do you want me to tell you about when I would be invited to the dances? That my mother insisted on going?

G: The social dances there at UTEP?

C: The social dances there at UTEP. My mother insisted on going.

G: Who sponsored the dances? Do you remember?

C: Well, there were different ones. There were some sponsored by the Newman Club, which is the Catholic Club. There were some sponsored by Sigma Delta Pi, that was honorary language society. There was one at the Country Club. I think that was the Spanish Language Club that Mrs. Fineau sponsored, and I remember that my mother wouldn't let me go, so she took me. Now my mother was a very nice person, very gracious, and she and Mrs. Fineau would sit together. In fact, if at any of the school-sponsored meetings my mother didn't go, when my brother got older and was going to school and he would take me, Mrs. Fineau would always say, "Oh, Elena, I miss your mother."

G: Oh, she enjoyed your mother's company.

C: [Yes.]

G: She served as a chaperone for you.



- C: Yes, she was the head of the language department.
- G: So, what was at the social dances? What did they have for refreshments?
- C: I think they must have had punch. However, there must have been something stronger outside, because some of those boys couldn't stand up after a while and some of the girls, too. (Chuckles)  
Now, I knew nothing about that, I just saw it, because my mother was right there and I had to report every so often. Even though I was dancing, I would have to report to her so she would see me.
- G: Okay, and the dances were usually held when? Fridays, Saturday evenings?
- C: There were some dances that were held mostly Saturdays I think.  
It's a long time ago. Remember that I graduated in '37. That was a hundred years ago. Nobody born at that date is alive now. (Laughter)
- G: From what time to what time were these dances usually held?
- C: About 8:00 to 12:00.
- G: Did they have security police?
- C: No, no, it was just chaperones, and there was the head of the department and maybe somebody else and my mother, and those were the three.  
And the boys like Adolfo Tres Palacios and a few of those boys thought my mother was the greatest. In fact, I remember once, Adolfo, I was dancing with him, and he asked me, "Is that your mother?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I thought she was an American lady." I said, "No, she's my mother. She doesn't speak English." And he said, "I've seen her driving a car!" I said, "I know, she brings me to school every day and waits for me." He said, "You mean she's a

Mexican and she drives a car?" I said, "Yeah, she drives her car."

"Oh." And then he went over and congratulated her and told her how wonderful, "That's the way more Mexican women should be."

G: Very progressive, very progressive for that time.

C: That's what my son said, that we must have been a very advanced family ideologically because I had gone to college. In those days, Mexican girls, a lot of them didn't go to high school. I remember when my mother sent me to high school that these friends of mine told Mama, "That's wasted money. What is she going to serve her husband? Algebra? Chemistry? Is that what she's going to serve her husband? Believe me, how is she going to iron his shirts?" And then my mother said, "Well, who said she's going to get married? She may not get married." Said, "Well, a thousand in one. One out of a thousand doesn't get married." My mother said, "Well, she doesn't have to get married."

G: That is very different, very different.

C: And my father would say, because my mother's relatives would say the same thing, they would say, "Hah, I guess you think she's a very studious girl. She's lazy. She's lazy. She doesn't want to help you. That's why she goes to school." And my father would say, "She's going to school as long as she's interested in it. When she isn't interested in it, she can quit." He got a heart condition after he quit work, because I had to go to work, and he had said, "You'll never have to go to work. You'll have your education. You'll do what you wish with it, but no work." Then I had to go to work and

support the [family]. And that hurt him very much. And I used to tell him, "Don't worry, Daddy. Supposing instead of sending us to school you had put away all that money, put it away, put it away. Now, you'd be living off the interest. Imagine, you're living off the interest now." (Laughter) And then he'd laugh and he'd say, "Ay, hijita; ay, hijita." And he'd pat me. It was a lot of fun. Don't think my life was sad, it was fun. (Chuckles) In the Depression. Oh, I worked. It was in '31 and '32, and clear to '37. See, I'd go to school, and then I graduated from high school and started college. The year after that, I started teaching. Do you think I quit working at the White House? No way. Saturdays I'd go work at the White House. (Chuckles) The lady there, Miss Rutherford, that was in charge of personnel was so cute. She put me right in the front. I was a hostess, really, 'cause all my friends, the teachers, would come in and say, "Hello, Elena." And I was just having the best time of my life.

G: Oh, it was just like your Saturday social.

C: Yes. And they'd have me in the jewelry and I'd put on the fancy jewels, you know, the semi-precious stones. (Laughter) "Oh, what a beautiful necklace." "Oh, it's for sale. It's \$30.00 or \$75.00 dollars," or whatever, in the Depression. And I remember once I took one of the semi-precious stones home accidentally. I had it on, a necklace, and I forgot it and took it home. I was so scared. I called Miss Rutherford's home and I said, "Miss Rutherford, this is Elena Garcia. I brought one of the necklaces home. I didn't mean to. I'll take it back Monday." She says, "Forget it Elena. Come back Saturday." The sweetest people you ever saw.

- G: Now, did a lot of people go to school during the Depression?
- C: Mostly engineers, mostly engineers. I think academics, there were very few of us.
- G: Okay, Engineering, that was of of the main colleges, Academics, which would now be, I guess, Liberal Arts?
- C: Yes.
- G: And Education, was that another college in itself?
- C: That was part of the academics.
- G: What other colleges were there at that time? Or was that what Texas College of Mines was at that time, just that?
- C: Yes. Because they only had two years of academics. After that you had to go to the University. But after I began teaching, they kept adding years so that they put in the junior year and then they put in the senior year, then they put in the Master's.
- G: Now, what university did they go to?
- C: The kids from here? Austin, mostly Austin.
- G: Austin? U.T. Austin, okay. So, all it was primarily was a two-year college, what we would consider a two-year college now.
- C: Like a junior college. Because they had moved from El Paso High to the two years at UTEP.
- G: Oh, so it all began at El Paso High?
- C: Yes, the top floor.
- G: I didn't know that. That's interesting.
- C: The top floor, the fourth floor, was junior college. Big girls and big boys.
- G: Ivory tower here.

C: Yeah. (Laughter)

G: Anything else you'd like to add?

C: I don't remember anything else. (Chuckles)

G: But you covered a lot of the most important people and things that you knew at the time.

C: Well, I'll tell you something. In 1979 we had our 50th high school anniversary, and we had the best time. First we all began getting together in different people's houses. They called me, a lot of my friends like Betty Lane Condon and a whole bunch of them. But I was very surprised because in those days the Jewish kids were very, very, very nice. Now my brother said they were very aloof four years later when he was at El Paso High. Now, during my time, they were darling. I mean, they were just best friends. And my best friend was Sarah Sorensky. Her twin sister Bernice was the valedictorian of our class, and I hadn't seen either one of them for a hundred years. And then when we went to this girl's house for our 50th anniversary, I saw them there ].