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Interview no. 696

Melvin N. Harris

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Melvin N. Harris
INTERVIEWER: Hector Uranga, Mario Galdos and Virgilio H. Sanchez
PROJECT: Border Labor History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 19, 1979
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 696
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 696

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former President Local 216 Boilermakers, Darbyshire, in
El Paso.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical data; experiences with discrimination in Akron, Ohio
and El Paso; experiences living in Juarez and problems encountered;
experiences in the union and as president of the same, especially
his leadership during the 1977 Darbyshire strike; subsequent problems
with finding employment.

Length of interview: 2 hours Length of transcript: 80 pages

Melvin Harris

by Hector Uranga, Mario Galdos and Virgilio H. Sánchez
November 19, 1979

S: Well, hello how are you doing?

H: Pretty good, for a Monday.

S: For a Monday. We'd like to know first of all when and where you were born.

H: I was born in Akron, Ohio, September 5, 1940.

S: And the name of your parents?

H: My father's name is Raymond Harris. My mother's name is Evelyn Harris. My mother was a registered nurse and still is, although retired. And my father worked for Firestone Tire and Rubber for 42 years before he retired. He was also a committeeman for the union there, and he was also a foreman.

G: Where did you have your education?

H: Most of my education took place in Ohio. The young years I went to Lane Elementary School. And from there I went to junior high for my seventh, eighth and ninth grade, in junior high. And then I went to Akron South High, where I played football and sports, and I was in the math club, and I was in a Youth for Christ movement. Then from there I went to Akron University.

S: We'd like to know your experiences from your elementary school, what you remember from your teachers, your fellow classmates--anecdotes. They can either be happy anecdotes, or sad.

H: Well, most of my school life was a pretty happy experience. Really, I never did have any problems with the learning process.

As far as on the elementary level, it was one experience where I did get a D and I tried to erase it, pour ink on it. When I got home I got a pretty good licking from my father. Henceforth, no more D's, and I kept going up. I made the honor roll every year at West Junior High. I made the honor roll every year at Akron South. I was a member of the Student Council. I had very close friends. I was easy to get along with. There was no real problems. But, you know, school back in those days was a lot different than what it is now. If you got a swat then, and they called home, you got a whipping when you got home. And sometimes if you got a swat they would sent you to the football coach or the teachers, you know. It wasn't like it is now. If you swat a kid you have to get permission or you're liable to get sued and so forth. Then school was very strict. I even remember one incident when I was in third grade. I went to school with a shirt with Coca-cola bottles on it. And my teacher told me, "Don't never bring it back," and she gave me a swat. And I asked her, you know, "Why?" And she gave us a demonstration in science where she put a piece of meat in a Coke, and after a while, you know, a couple of days, you know, it ate up the meat. And I wasn't allowed to wear the shirt back to school.

I never did go to a segregated school. The schools I went to in Ohio was all integrated and I wasn't exposed to any segregation in Ohio. We had no friction between the

racers. We might go to an Anglo's house and stay over-night, they might come over our house. We had friction as it is today between high schools. But it's not as out of hand as it is now, breaking windows and throwing bricks at buses. We'd, you know, have some blows after the game or something like that. But it wasn't as profound as it is now when it becomes Homecoming. I never remember that we went to another school and threw paint on the school, or broke the windows and so forth, or broke car windows. It is this way today in 1979. It's a very big part of Homecoming, where you have a rival team and you go break the other school's windows and throw paint on it and throw paint on the cars and break the windshields. When I was coming up, this was a no-no. You just didn't do it. They were strict. It seems to me that the educational process was a little bit better. I didn't have as many distractions. Although mine was one of the first families in the neighborhood to get a TV. But you know, it was only Howdy Doody on the air at that time. I used to get home and watch Howdy Doody and the Bandstand. But I used to go to the library a lot. And now you can't get a kid to go to the library for a report. If a teacher is known to give out, in this day and age, known to give out book assignments, the students tend not to try to get that teacher. Where before, students were more proud and we would try to get the most stars on a list. We had our name /listed/ as we read so many books.

S: Do you remember any of your teachers in particular from your elementary and high school years?

H: About the only ones that I can recall is Mrs. Hall, which was my history teacher. And the others just seem to slip me. I was trying to remember the name of my football coach but I just can't recall it. Probably with a little time it will probably come back to me, some of these teachers names, because we got along pretty good.

One experience that I did have which I did turn against one of my teachers, I was going for valedictorian. I had a perfect A all through high school, and I was a senior. And me and this one kid who's Anglo was running neck and neck. Sometime he'd win on a test with the highest scores, sometimes it would be me. I would excel a little bit more in sports than, you know, he would, and I was a little bit better liked because I used to like to talk and rap and so forth. So coming down to the line it was between me and him for valedictorian. And we both figured it was going to be grade-wise. So coming down to the stretch when report cards came out I was given a B in Physics. I was taken back and I told my father that, "I should've had an A". My tests verified this out. I had an A average. My lab experiments verified this out, because you have your lab book. I took this home and showed my father. We went up and seen the principal. So then it comes down to where they leave a little gray area where they grade on attitude. And this was the area which he says he took the points away

from me. And a Robert Frog, never forget him, was given an A and I was given B, and henceforth he got to be the valedictorian for our graduating class.

And this, you know, hurts me for many a year, and I still remember it and I look back on it. But you know, I'm adult now. At the time I couldn't comprehend or understand, you know, it was probably because of my race. Robert Frog happens to be an Anglo and I happen to be a black, and this is the way I look back on it now. Then I didn't see it that way because we had never had any racial frictions in Ohio. In fact the last that's supposed to be on record was back in 1920 or something, when they supposedly hanged a black man for raping a white woman. And this is far as I remember any race relations. Hell, it was always a neighborhood fight. Or you know, the West side against the East side or North side, something like this. But never a racial /fight/. We got along pretty well on that. But those about the only experiences that I can remember that sort of sticks with me as an adult some 25 years later.

G: You never have any kind of discrimination problems, as you were telling us.

H: No, not when I was coming up. It wasn't none. Like I said, you might have a black family here, white here, white here, black here, black here and so forth. There were no problems.

S: Actually no difference than.

H: No. It wasn't noticeable. The only real thing that I did

hear was when I was called a nigger once, and my father went down and beat up the store owner. I went in there to buy some nuts. It was around Christmastime.

S: But that was already here in El Paso.

H: No, this was still in Akron, Ohio. I went down to the store and I went to buy some nuts. So I went in there and I asked, you know, for some nigger toes. Because we didn't make any distinction between the word, we didn't consider ourselves niggers. And if you look in a dictionary, nigger could be any person, any bad-acting person. So the store owner told me to hold up my feet and he would cut my toes off and give me some nigger toes. So I went back and told my father. And my father, he's a pretty big man and tips the scales about 290, 300, and we went down there. He got that old boy. He was a white guy and in fact he's Polish, and gave him a pretty good licking. But that's about the only time which something like this, you know, came up. But other than that we had never had any racial conflicts during my childhood or I can't recall any concerning any of my brothers and sisters. They probably were there but they were dormant, or the Anglos didn't flaunt them because you have a lot of Black businessmen in Ohio, in or around Ohio, owns businesses, and you have a lot of blacks. Some of your councilmen in your districts, in your wards, you know, were black. So you know, it just didn't pay to start any animosities or frictions between the races.

Now I think, underneath you probably have some blacks there would call them honkies and so forth behind their back. And then you had some whites that calling us niggers behind our backs, and then you have some would call wops, you know. You probably have this, but it wasn't evident. It wasn't a big issue and I thought everything was the same thing everyplace else until this experience happened in 1955. I believe I was in the 10th grade and that was the Little Rock incident. We got it in our school paper. And I read about the demonstrations down there, that blacks weren't allowed to go to school. They didn't want them to go to school. So I got exposed to that but from outside the state of Ohio. I'd been to Chicago out to the zoo. I had been to Indiana to visit my grandparents. But other than that it's all been around, you know, Ohio, so I never was exposed to other states and was never aware of this problem until it did come out in the papers in 1955 on that school incident.

S: Where did you go to college?

H: I went to Akron University, started off studying to be a doctor. And after some real consideration, after they opened the body, dead body, and I was supposed to take out the liver and test him and I vomited in that old boy's chest, I decided against going to the medical profession and decided to take my minor and major in math. And then I dropped that and I went into the service and decided to take more college in the service.

S: What can you tell us about your college life, your college years?

H: Oh, they were pretty fulfilling.

S: You were playing ball, right?

H: I played football. I made All-Junior Varsity for the Zips, which was our name for Akron University. I got along pretty good and I thought I was pretty good. I was rough. I didn't back up nothing. Sometime I'd be hurt and still play 'cause it...now you call it macho, you know. Then you call it being a man. As you know, the winters are pretty cold there, and the months that we played start from Thanksgiving, you know. The ground would be just as hard as cement. We wore spikes in those days, and when you get stepped on you have respect for the guy that stepped on you, you try to get him later on down the line. And you were always trying to make first string because sitting on the bench and then they put you in going in there, and soon as somebody hit you, you know, you feel that shudder through you. So, you know, football in those days it made a man of you. You couldn't be a baby to go out of it. You didn't have any of the pain killers which they are giving athletes now. You didn't have it. An Ace bandage or tape couldn't do it, you were just out of luck.

S: Especially the cleats, you know.

H: Oh, yeah. They also got a lot of pock marks in there. But other than that it was pretty fulfilling. I enjoyed my college

life. I went to pledge a fraternity, the Phi Theta Kappa, and I never did go into it since I did drop out and joined the Air Force. Took the exam and I scored high in all classifications, so I had my pick as to what area that I wanted to go in, and I chose electronics. I did like to tinker. I had a bicycle shop when I was a kid, I used to work on bicycles a lot when I was a kid. And when the iron stops running at the house, just take it apart, and radios. And that's the reason why I'm still a tinkerer today.

S: How many years did you go to school there?

H: I went to Akron University two years.

S: Then you continued your education back here, right?

H: Right. I joined the service, Air Force.

S: What can you tell us about the Air Force? Any incidents you remember?

H: Well, there's one memory probably gonna stick with me 'cause I got a scar from it, I got a scar from it. And then, you know, it's something I don't too much brag about. But it's when we graduated from tech school in Illionis. I was going to Chanute Air Force Base and we graduated, and was getting our assignments. You know, when you graduate tech school and just like any young man'd do, you go out and drink and you get drunk. Now I've never been accustomed to drinking. I used to not drink or smoke. I used to sneak every now and then, you know. So I happened to get drunk on a I.W. Harper.

Never forget that brand. It's stuck with me through the years. We got drunk so that one of our airmen challenged me that he bet I couldn't stop a big floor fan. In those days we didn't have air conditioning in the barracks, we had a big old fan. So, "Yes, I can stop that fan." I stuck my hands in there and grabbed that fan, and it cut me to the bone. One experience.

Another one when I was in the service, I was in basic training and I went in with one stripe 'cause I had had ROTC while I was in college. So I was given one stripe when I entered the service. So since I had some prior military experience and had been on the Pershing Rifle team, was an expert with the rifle 22, I was made a squadron leader. So a squadron leader has certain responsibilities. So, you know, while you're in the service there are people happened to be from other states. So we had some from Alabama and Georgia and Mississippi. We had some in my squadron. And one incident, one white guy told me, "I'm not taking any orders from that big nigger." And I have never been spoken to in just these terms, you know, so I thought he was joking. I thought, you know, he needs to get his stuff together. He swung that punch, and I lit into him since I used to box a little bit, Golden Gloves. I lit into him and layed him out. My TI came, tech sergeant and directed it towards me like I was at fault. But a lot of other airmen stood up for me, says, "No, was the other guy's fault." But however, I was relieved of being a squad

leader because that I was supposed to have been hot-headed, that I should have reported the incident. But how can you report an incident when somebody has already hit you, you know. You don't back up and turn the other cheek. I have never believed it, and I don't tell my kids this today. I tell them, "Don't initiate a fight, but don't back up." I believed it then, I'll believe it now. That's the way I was raised.

In fact, when my brother...once he ran from a fight, and my father seen 'im. My father took him in the house and whipped him and told him to go back out there and beat him. That boy beat him again. My brother ran again, back in the house, my father gave him another whipping. My brother went back out there. He beat that old boy. He beat him. And have been beating him ever since. His name is Richard Lewis. He beat Richard Lewis. Richard Lewis is scared of him. But it took that. And my father's always been a proud person. We don't like to start nothing, but he just always, you know, hated a coward. I didn't back up from that guy back there, and I probably won't today. I'm just not built that way. But that's an incident that did happen there. And it had, you know, it had racial overtones. And we seen a lot of them, you know, in the service.

When I was in the service, I started seeing that segregation where say a black would start hanging out with more of the blacks or other minority groups, and whites would start hanging out with mostly whites. Now I took my basic training

in San Antone. Usually it was the blacks and the Mexicans together, you know. Wouldn't say a clique, because we had a lot of white guys that was from Chicago and Detroit. They would hang out, you know, with both. They wouldn't show any favoritism. But there was a couple when it came down to if they had to make a choice, they stuck with the blacks, you know. And one was Gerald Salsman. Me and him, we came down together on the plane. I didn't know him from before. We met up there when they was putting us on the plane, made friends. We went through basic together, we went to tech school together in Chicago, Chanute Air Force Base, we went drinking together. Was inseparable. When we took leaves we left together going home and we got together when we was coming back; meet up, and then come back. 'Cause from Ohio I would go to Chicago first (that's where he lived at), and come back. And we were stationed here at Biggs Field together. So we was together pretty long time. He was an Anglo and he never did see any distinction. And if it came down where some Anglos would bring something up, he would just, you know, tell them that they're dumb and ignorant, that it's a sign of a lack of education. And one incident that happened here in El Paso, we were denied admittance to the Palace Theatre. And he had already paid his money and I was paying mine. They said, "Sorry," very politely, "no blacks allowed." And he got mad.

S: What year was that?

H: This was in 1960. And they said no blacks allowed.

So we were drinking a soda. He took the bottle and just broke the window and we took off running. We ended up in Juárez. When we started going to Juárez there was a lot of places that we couldn't go to.

S: Even in Juárez?

H: No, in Juárez, we were able to go to over 90 percent of the places, places like the Waikiki #1 and #2. Back in those days we did have a little time, and a place they used to call The Cave. Some places they didn't tell us to get out, but they would double or triple the price on us for drinks and so forth. And you know, prostitution is widespread there, and some of the girls, you know, wouldn't go with us and so forth. But this was just in some of the places. But this was only very few places that was there. And it's the reason why that I start to frequent that more so than going to places in El Paso, 'cause it was only about two bars, three bars I could go to. And there was only one movie and that was the Colón movie that I could go to the movies, unless I was going to on post. And I was kicked out of several bars.

S: You remember any incidents?

H: One incident which I probably won't forget, I was coming back from Juárez one morning. And it's a...used to be a drugstore, I don't know if you remember it or not. Used to be a drugstore catty-cornered from Alligator Park, Alligator Park downtown, San Jacinto's Park. Used to be

a drugstore catty-cornered. So I went in there and I was feeling pretty hung-over. It was in the morning, I was going to catch the Biggs Field bus back to base. So I went in there to get served, and I asked for some coffee, black. And I don't drink coffee, but they told me it always fixes you up. So I went in there and I was served that day, and it was by a white lady. Okay. Drunk my coffee and I left, got on the bus, thought nothing of it. This was right after I'd first got here. So about a week or two later I made that same stop, went in there, ordered me a cup of black coffee, and this was this Mexican girl in there that didn't speak pretty good English. I asked for a cup of coffee. Said, "Sorry, we don't serve no blacks."

G: The Mexican girl told you that?

H: Yeah, yeah. And so I told her, "I was here a couple of weeks ago and I got served." Says, "Not here." And I says, "Well, there's very few places that I get served here in El Paso, but I got served here a couple of weeks ago." So me and her was arguing back and forth. So the manager came out, and he says, "We don't serve blacks here, but if you need some coffee, I'll give you some coffee. But you must take it and leave." You know, so I got sort of mad, and I told him, well, this was after I came from Juárez and I told him, I says, "Well, I'm in the United States Air Force. I'm defending this country and I believe this girl here is illegal. I don't think she was born here

in the United States. I was born here in the United States, went to school here, and now I'm defending the country, and you tell me that I can't get served." He says, "We'll serve you, but you can't drink it here." And they called the police. I was put out. I didn't get taken to jail, they just put me out. And I was told not to go back there anymore.

S: This was 1960 more or less.

H: That was 1960.

S: When did you first get here to El Paso, if you remember?

H: I got here in September of 1960, is when I got here.

And you know, after a couple of times of this and like I says, you know, I never did like to go looking for any fights or any trouble. I was never, you know, before exposed to such discrimination and prejudice and segregation, you know. But I heard that everything was all right in Juárez. That's where most of the blacks were going.

S: You don't remember the name of the place?

H: I don't remember, but it was a drugstore. It was catty-cornered from San Jacinto Plaza.

S: Next to Kress?

H: On the opposite corner from Kress.

G: What about the other restaurants, like McDonald's, Denny's?

H: Well, I don't remember McDonald's restaurants back in those days, I don't know how long they've been here in El Paso, but I can't recall because I really never tried to make the effort. But it was several, and they have

since changed names, that used to be on South El Paso Street which I attempted to go in and was refused service. There were several up on Dyer I was refused service. But most of them are out of business now. I have noticed the names change.

But there's one bar that I remember that I had a hassle, and it was called the Rock Inn, and that's still in existence. And this was I think around...not too late, I guess about '64 when they started those private clubs where they used to give you a card. And I went in there with an Anglo girl. We asked for service. So they served her, then I asked for a drink. They asked me was I a member of the club, did I have a card. I says, "No. But she doesn't either. She came with me." I was going out with her. Her name was Patricia. I was going out with her. And I know she didn't have any. He says, "No, you must be a member." So she got mad right away and turned her beer upside down and we went on out the bar. But that was one place, and that's the reason why they started that type of club back in that time, about you got to have a member's club. And it was to keep certain ethnic groups out. In other words, they could say, "Hey, let's discard..." There used to be a club on South Oregon Street which after union meetings we used to go to. And it was called...what was it called? Right across from the union hall.

U: Oh, Red Star.

H: The Red Star. It was called The Red Star. Now to show you that we know that this private club was a sham, they used to have a stack of these club cards sitting on the bar. You know, just in case you know, liquor board came in. Why, everybody coming in the door was given one of these cards. Just had a great big stack. Just take a card. Member of the club, you know. And this is exactly what it was. If you came in there and you were black, they could refuse you 'cause you wasn't a member of the club. But they never did tell you how you could become a member. I've asked. I was told I would have to be recommended by one of the patrons there. This was a bunch of malarkey because it just didn't wash. It was their way to keep certain ethnic groups out of those clubs. And this is the way that El Paso went.

Now one time back in '62 a lot of blacks got together. And this was from Oro Grande, Fort Bliss and Biggs Field. And they approached the mayor at that time, and I believe it was Telles. I'm not sure.

U: Raymond Telles.

H: And he was approached and one asked him about segregation in the city of El Paso. They were told that in the city of El Paso there was no segregation. That was on an individual basis. So a lot of us servicemen got together and we was going to boycott the city of El Paso. We was gonna you know, just go to Juárez, period. And you know, we were

not gonna do any business with them. And when they found out that a lot of not only black soldiers would be involved, but a lot of Mexican soldiers /werē/ getting involved and there was a lot of white soldiers who was associating with black, you know...we're out there every day with the white guy, and we're working together and everything, and we're going together, and we even go to Juárez together, and they have feelings also. And we had a lot of whites from Detroit and Ohio and so forth that wasn't a part of this discrimination and segregation. So El Paso I guess started changing on their own and the businessmen started seeing where their business was going to be hurt. And it was no special order that came from the mayor. I think we made the news once or twice down there, I can't really recall. But El Paso changed on their own.

Also, I used to be stopped by the police several times when I would have a white girl in the car. I remember an incident. They were forcibly taking me out of my car and they told me if I ever get caught again they was gonna shoot me. Yeah, I was forcibly dragged out of my car, and told me to be on my way.

S: Were they Anglos?

H: Yeah. And this happened as late as 1965.

S: Can you tell us more about the incident?

H: Well, at that time I was going with a white girl. And I was working in New Mexico, highway construction. I was

a heavy equipment operator. So we had come down to El Paso to go to Juárez and fool around, see some of our friends. 'Cause I had been living in Juárez I guess ever since, well, ever since I got here. Started in 1960, I got me a girlfriend. So through '60 and '61 I had been living here, and '62, '63. But I got together with this white girl, she was living with me up in New Mexico. So we came down and went to Juárez. So we was leaving to go back up to Lordsburg, New Mexico. So when we left Juárez, got on Paisano, we got just getting in to where the smelter is. Police car pulled us over. I said, you know, "What's wrong? What did I do? I wasn't speeding." He said, "No, you wasn't speeding." He says, "You have a driver's licence?" Showed him my driver's license. "Who's car is this?" "My car." "Whose is this young lady?" "She's my girlfriend." And they asked my buddy, he says, "You all been drinking?" I says "No." 'Cause we had just gotten up so hung over, but I hadn't been drinking. So they says, "And where are you taking her?" I says, "We're going back home. We're going to New Mexico. We live together." He says, "You ever heard of white slavery?" "No." I says, "Oh, man, get off of it. It's just one girl. She'll tell you she lives with me." He says, "No, we'll take your ass in for white slavery, take you to the country and beat the hell out of you." And they made her get out, told her, "Get out of the car." She didn't want to get out. So they took her and grabbed her by the hair and slung her

out. So I went to get out. He put his elbow and hit me, and I grabbed his arm, so his partner came around. He had the gun. "Okay man, cool it. No problem." So they took her. And he told me to get my ass back in New Mexico. So when I went driving and they followed me, finally turned off where Executive Center is. So I hooked back around going to the police station, I'm going to report them. So I get on the police station and I see her walking over here. So I go pick her up and I says, "What happened Patricia?" And she's telling me, "No, they told me don't mess with you niggers no more. Next time they catch me they're gonna rape me and do all this." And I says, "Well, are you ready to go or what?" She says, "You know, I was going to catch the bus to go home!" So she got in there, and we went on to New Mexico. We didn't come back to El Paso for about a month or so.

S: You didn't report it?

H: No. It was better left unsaid. Once when I was in the service, I was investigated for armed robbery. I was going to a game at one of the high schools, Jefferson. And I was in the car with about four other blacks and two Anglos. And all of a sudden four, five police cars and detective cars drove up, all around my car. I had a 1956 Oldsmobile, turquoise blue and silver grey. Pretty. My father bought it for me when I went home on leave. And they cocked these old guns in our faces and everything.

"Nigger, you move, you're dead." "What's going on?"
You don't do anything, you know. You feel sort of
bravo, you know, you feel incensed that somebody's...
you know. We're trying to ask and they got to pushing
us and they put the handcuffs on our back and clipped
them, set them in there, took me down, took me to the
interrogation room. And there was three of the biggest
white men I ever seen. Because by that time I got all
scared, for one thing. I'm not going to tell you no
lie about that. Had me in the room and telling
they're going to take me to the desert and they're going
to beat me up and all this, and they want to know where
the money was, and that my car has been identified. 'Cause
you know, there's not many of those cars that color and
so forth. I says, "No, I'm in the service and I'd like
to call my first sergeant, have him come down here. Be-
cause I'm one of the outstanding airmen up there. I don't
get in trouble. It's just not my style. If I need money
you know, I call my parents." They used to send me
money every month you know, besides my pay. I go to Juárez
and blow it, you know. And they would send me money.

So then I remember a door opening and I heard a guy
said, "No, that's not him." And I had just challenged
this one guy, 'cause I had my handcuffs on and he's gonna
beat me and fight me. And I told him, I says, "Look, you
take these handcuffs off me and I'll fight you now to
doomsday, hand to hand combat. And I guarantee you won't win."

At that time I was boxing for the Air Force. In fact I was 15th Air Force Boxing Champ. And I told him, "You take these handcuffs off where I can hit back, and me and you go at it." And I said, "Two of you." You know, I got mad at him, threaten' me and punching me, especially after I heard when the door opened that guy says, "No, that's not him." So then you know, they went to apologize. And they'd towed my car. Then I heard this one white detective says, "Well, you know, you got to understand all you niggers look alike." I said, "Man, why don't you get off the bullshit." I said, "I still want to call my first seargent and get him down here to attest to all this, 'cause I don't have to take it. I'm government property. You threatened me, you done pushed me to put these handcuffs on me. You had my car towed. Now I want my car." They had to go out there and they had to pay the towing fine, because now when we got out there they had to take me out there to the pound to get my car. Now they had to pay the towing charge, 'cause I told them I wasn't paying it. I didn't have no money, so they had to pay it. So I overheard this one white detective tell the other, "We should've charged the nigger." See, 'cause if you get charged, see, then even if you get cut loose, you know, you didn't do it, you still got to pay for having your car towed. But since I was released, never charged or anything, they had to pay.

S: Did they apologize any at all?

H: No, not really. The only thing that he say you know, "Sorry for the hassle," and that was it. But he still used nigger like those everyday words.

S: What year was that?

H: Now this was...I was still in the service. This was in 1962 or there, tail end of '61.

S: You didn't get to call your sergeant?

H: No.

S: You got your car right away and all that.

H: I did since I was turned loose. And I was glad of it. I missed the football game. I forget who was playing Jefferson that day though, but that's where I was going was to the football game. But that's one thing that I'll never, you know, forget on that thing. So after it was over I was pretty well satisfied and glad to be free and finished with it, and I never did tell my first sergeant. It was just better to be left alone, and I just left it like that. Never reported.

G: Can you tell us if you had other times some other incidents of that kind?

H: Not really. I had a couple of incidents in Juarez, but other Anglos; we had a couple of fights over there. I was drinking in a bar one day, and Anglos, about four of them, bust in there, come in, ordered drinks and said, "Look at the niggers." We went to fighting,

so we both went to jail. I remember that, we went to jail. And we became friends going to jail. We go on in there, and we're both Americans, and we never heard about the Juarez jail. (Laughter) So we had to be sort of united.

S: Tell us about the Juarez jail.

H: Back at that time they had one that didn't have no tower. And this was in the wintertime, and it's one of them few times that it was snowing in El Paso. So I wasn't used to Juarez police, you know. They get you and pull your pants up and it goes right in the crack of your back. So I turn around and that old boy, he grabbed me, and I turned around again, he hit me and I hit him. They got me up that police station, about five of 'em got on me with the macanas. Pop. They threw me in that thing with no roof. Just wet and snowing in there.

S: They hit you with the macanas?

H: Yeah, they hit me. Yeah, they said, "You bad dude. Yeah, pinche negro." I'll never forget that. So I got out the next day. The CID came from Fort Bliss, and long as you don't have no fine they'll get you out okay. So they got me out. And they used to have a little station when you crossed the bridge and they used to have a shore patrol there and Fort Bliss MP's. And they got a jail there. They went and took us out

of that jail and put us in their jail. "Now what is this? We never did nothing." "Well, this is a holding tank till they come get you." So they came and got me from Biggs Field and they drove me there, and they took me to the clinic there. And they take you in there and they check you for bugs in the hair and everything, you know. Check your pulse and your heart, then they turn you loose. But I didn't want back there, but I wasn't that fortunate. I went back several more times.

S: How long were you there in the jail?

H: Usually just overnight.

S: Just overnight.

H: Yeah, they'll come and arrest you and says, "You're drunk. Give me your money." And I was one of these types I didn't give my money. I used to carry it in my sock, and then some guy told me to cut a place right here where you put your belt thing on the inside of your pants, cut a hole and stick your money in there. And since I usually never had no money, they used to take me to jail all the time. Then they used to come around and we used to be scared of the patrullas over there, the patrol cars at night. You'll be walking down the street and they'll stop, and the first couple of times I didn't think nothing of it. They stop and search you for knives. Never had a knife. Then they'll ask you for coffee money, handout money.

But some of them would search you and close their fists and run a joint of marihuana in your pocket, and then pull it out, "Hey, you been messin' with marihuana." At that time in Juarez having marihuana was a misdemeanor, now it's a felony. But at that time it was a misdemeanor. So you used to have to give that old cop five or ten dollars to keep from going to jail. And they would do this to us everytime they'd see a soldier.

S: Do you remember any times when it happened to you?

H: Yes, they did it to me twice. And this is the reason why that the service, the Army, ordered all military personnel cannot go to Juarez in uniform, regardless of your rank. They just stopped us. This is also fatigues, And they used to check us coming back. If you was going back across they would take you at the bridge, you know, a little Army holding tank, and go put you in there if you was in uniform or fatigues. You couldn't go to Juarez in a uniform or fatigues, 'cause they was taking advantage of the servicemen.

And they used to have little clip joint games over there, you know--Three Card Molly and Pea Game. I lost all my leave money in the Harlem Bar in 1961 on Three Card Molly and that Pea. And they're pretty slick. And I found out since how you do it. You know, that pea is never under there, it's never under there. And he purposely crimps a card. But I got hooked. I was

19 years old, in there drinking. You know, drinking thoughts of being a man, drinking that tequila. And I lost my leave money, a couple of hundred bucks. And that quit me. I don't gamble. I might get in some penny ante gambling, but I've never gambled and I don't like going to bet on horses and so forth. So maybe that was a good experience for me 'cause I know, like my brother-in-law, he has lost his whole paycheck out there on the horses at Sunland Park. I'm not that way. I have another friend who gambles, he'll gamble six, seven hundred dollars away. I don't have habits. Gambling doesn't faze me. So maybe that was a good experience at that young age. So I'm sort of glad it happened because I didn't know where to go. I already signed out on leave and I'd already gotten my leave pay. So for two or three days I didn't have a place to go until my father sent me some money.

S: What'd you do?

H: My father finally sent some money. And I stayed with a Buddy.

S: In Juarez?

H: And I was sneaking to Biggs Field to eat. (Laughter)
It was a heck of a situation, but I think it made me the wiser for it. And if I see it going...sometimes I used to see it go on since then. I used to ease up to a nice young guy and I tell him, "It's a trap." You know, explain it to him. "Look how it happened to me."

S: How's the trap? Can you explain this more, or how it happened?

H: Well, that was about the three peas, about that pea. What it is, that pea is never under one of those three caps he uses. He'll palm it.

S: Where was this at?

H: This was in the Harlem Club in Juarez. What he does, he's fast. You have three caps and one pea. And what he'll do, he'll put the three caps up there and show you where a pea's under them. Then he'll move them this way. Then he'll give you a demonstration, you know. And you choose it and it's there, see. So you figure he's trying to sucker you in and he gets a little faster. And you pick it again, you know, and the pea's there. And he gets faster, but you figure you know, you heard that the hand's quicker than the eye, but you figure you know, you can keep up with him. Okay. So he suckers you in and lets you win the first twenty. That's when you should quit if you can make it out the door. But usually you say it's so easy, there you go again, so you don't quit. But what he does when you get involved in betting this money, the pea is not under there, he puts it between two fingers here and holds it that way. So you pick the cap and he says no. So when you go to pick up the other cap, he picks it up this way and shoves the pea in that way, and there's your pea. It's never under any of the caps. And when

he tells you to pick it up, grab his hands, or you just take up all three caps, there's no pea there.

S: How about the cards?

H: The cards, well what they do, and you get suckered in, you know. You have three cards and he'll hold them this way and he'll throw one over in this way. Now that is a sleight of a hand. But where they get the edge, he'll crimp one and let you see the crimp, see, You see that crimp. "Hey, I know that one's marked." So you're not paying any attention to his hands, all you're going to look for is a crimped card. Okay, all you're looking for as a crimped card. He stalls them down there and you looking, and you grab that crimped card. But it's another ace, the ace of spades, to the ace of hearts you were looking for. He'll straighten the other one out and then crimped another one. Now he's slick and he's pretty fast with his hands. This is why they call it sleight of a hand. This, you know, is a sham and you get suckered into it. And I got suckered into it.

S: Was it a Mexican guy?

H: Yeah, the bartender. We have since become real good friends, real good friends. They used to call me Yucker. I guess that must mean joker.

S: Is the bar still there?

H: The bar is still there, but it's under another name. It phased out with a lot of the other red light joints over

there, they closed. At one time Juarez was wide open. I mean wide open. You could buy yourself out of a murder. Anything. Could have somebody killed there-- a hundred bucks. I have seen it. My buddy, who's now my buddy, I hadn't known him back then, he killed several people in an automobile accident. Cost him several thousand dollars. His fault, 'cause he was stone drunk. Paid and got out of it. You know, you hear on the grapevine this guy got killed because of you know, accident, all you got to do is pay the cop. You can go over there and you can have anybody you want arrested. If I don't like you, I wait till I get you over to Juarez and go tell the police, "Take him in." What I do is give them a couple of bucks and you go on up there. It's the inconvenience of staying in jail overnight, you know, up there. Back in those days you used to have the chicharra, the shocks, electric shocks.

S: You never got any of that?

H: I never did, but one of my close friends did.

S: Can you tell us about his incident?

H: Well, it's the time I came out in the paper.

U: I still got that paper.

H: Yeah. I used to live in Mexico ten years. And so one day I was sitting in there, New Year's, getting ready to look at my TV, color TV. All of a sudden I hear a knock on the door. Before I got to it the door had opened

from this knock and he closed it back. So I opened the door and told him to come in. It was at that time, what's it called, the Servicio Secreto. So I told them to come on in. And they /told/ me they looking for stolen goods--you know, TVs and so forth and money--and can they search my house? I said, "I haven't done anything. I don't come here to make trouble. I'm married and live here, I've got my kids." They came in and searched the house, and says, "Well, that color TV is one of them." I says, "No, it's not one of them. That's mine. I got the papers." Says, "Well, your car's license plates was recorded at the scene of robbery."

So they took me down and I was placed in jail. But I wasn't placed in the main jail, I was placed in what they call one of the delegaciones. And it was way up on the hill. It was delegacion numero trece. And it in the wintertime and it was cold. My wife was never told where I was. But she finally found out after about 18 hours. She had went to all of them, found me, but they wouldn't let her see me. So she gave some money, a mordida, to the jailer. And I was given food, but as you probably figure I had no appetite. All I wanted was some juices and so forth, you know, and I drunk some hot soup. So I stayed there about six days and I still hadn't found out about the nature of the charges or whatever. So in the seventh day I was taken out to the main jail and

hooked in. And they start asking me about these break-ins and safe break-ins, so forth, and I was the leader. I says, "No, I'm a union official. I work every day. If you check my records where I work at, I've never missed a day of working." At that time I had never missed a day of work. Never. Anytime overtime, I always had my hand up, I wanted to work overtime.

So /I was in there/ with some friends of mine. What they had did, they just went out and got all blacks. I think they arrested about 16 or seventeen. And out of those I think only three or four was involved in robberies. But since I used to go to a bar we used to have, a special bar called the 77, which was the hang out, you know, not only for blacks but a lot of Chicanos used to come in because it's got the soul music. They have all soul music on there. And then you could buy a bottle of liquor in the bar or you could buy a bottle of liquor from the outside and take it in the bar, and you get your set-ups free. Only thing you had to pay for was the soda, see, and they'd charge you 40 cents. Well, at that time it was a quarter for the soda. Or you could buy it say in the store for a nickel.

S: When was this more or less?

H: This happened in, oh, I think it was 19...it was in New Year's 1970. That's when I got arrested, New Year's 1970. And so we'd drink with these guys. You don't know

what they're doing, it just was a meeting place when you get out after work. Now some of my friends from the job have been there, we've had drinks there, 'cause several of my friends that we worked there-- Cubillos, Corona, you know just a hang out--go there 'cause you could get liquor, you know, bring your own bottle and then you don't buy it by the shot. Real cheap. Any liquor you want. Stateside liquor even. Doesn't make any difference. So anyway, they got to know us there. And they'd arrested us because of this. And took me up there and says I had a close association with these guys. I didn't know them, I didn't know they was ripping off. I probably knew it deep down, but you know, they're adults. I can't tell them what to do. Just /Tike/ if you knew a friend of yours ripped off, it's not your business, you know.

And so I stayed in there, and some of the other union officers came over and seen me, brought me some cigarettes and talked to the people. "Well, Harris is a union official. He works here," and so forth. So they start checking out the El Paso Police, and I had a FBI clearance because I was at a site base. And says, "He's been clean all the way through. Outstanding citizen. Never been in detention home, never been arrested," you know. And they checked Darbyshire. So then they wanted to charge me \$800 to turn me loose, clear the paperwork. So my wife went, got my check. We started trying to clear up the papers. So I seen one of these

Police detectives come in and I remember I used to work with his brother at Smelter in 1963. And he happens to be the brother of the chief of police at that time, of the secret police. I seen him, I yelled at him. They grabbed me, and he come, "What you doint here?" I says, "Well, I've been, you know, I'm not involved in this stuff. They trying to get me." So they went and talked it over. I ended up paying 50 Bucks and I got out of there. I was in there 20 days and I got frostbitten feet. And I have trouble with my feet today. They shed, I get these water blisters on them. But my feet was frostbitten from when I was up in that delegacion up there on the hill. Had no windows in it, wouldn't let me have my blanket, no heaters, no nothing. And my feet just got frostbit there. And it was a very sad experience.

S: What kind of food were you getting there?

H: Oh, no, my wife was able to bring home-cooked meals. But for the first 10 days I had no appetite. In fact, I lost about 30 pounds when I was in there. But I was eating steaks.

S: How come?

H: I had no appetite. I didn't know when I was going to get out, you know. I was being charged, I was put in the penitentiary part. There was no fine on me. Then my wife come and vist me on visiting days and my little kid coming in there, you know. And they have there in Juarez, the

Penitentiary, visitas conyugales, you know. And this is the only way you able to get in with your wife and have some sex. And they have in there, you know, you get up in the morning, they have talache. The only way you don't have talache is you pay el capataz a mordida, you know, capitaz. You got to give him that money. And this is on a weekly basis. If you don't, you go in and clean the latrines with a red brick, five o'clock in the morning. And you might get killed, I seen one guy stabbed in there. Homemade knife made out of a file. Stabbed. Drug related. I've seen pounds of heroin. They spread it on the mirror and they use a razor blade, they divide it up in sections and put it in ballons. Heroin right thepe in the jail.

I was in there when this big shot in there, a relative of Nacha's was in there. And he was living like a king. He invited me over to his canton for scotch, scotch and milk. You know, big shot. After I got in and got involved, but you got to get in there quick 'cause they'll rip you off. In fact, we used to take turns sleeping when I first got in there, first several days. Sleep on the floor, and my partner he stand out there, he be looking around, you know. And us Blacks tend to stay together till we got in there, and because of my Spanish they accepted me as, you know, as little chicano in there, because of the Spanish and

the things I know, you know. Hang in there. So it was never no problems because of that, and I survived because of the Spanish. The guys who did commit the robberies ended up staying six months before they was able to pay \$2000 and get out, but they got out of it scot-free. You know, after paying up \$2000. And they survived because of the Spanish that they knew.

But eventually I got out and I moved to El Paso. That's why I moved over here. Soon as they turned me loose, I went and I bought this home. I didn't go and rent an apartment, nothing, because I knew I wasn't going back over there to live. Anytime that you can't be in your house, live in peace, without them coming jacking you up, knowing you're not guilty and doing it for the money, I had to leave. And I left and I've been here ever since, in this same house. I bought it, it was brand spanking new. It hadn't even been built yet.

S: How long were you in Juarez?

H: I lived in Juarez 10 years.

S: Any other incidents you recall from Juarez at that time you lived over there?

H: Oh, not really. I did some union work over there. I had met with several organizations over there, CTM. A lot of people used to come to me for help and advice because of my medical background, and they used to call me Dr. Corazon over there. (Laughter) Marriages break up,

are on the outs, I go and talk to them about this and go talk to the wife, you know, and so forth. I always have been that way.

G: But was a kind of social work you were doing there, or it was just because...?

H: Well, at one time the CTM, which is the largest labor organization over there but it wasn't the biggest known, they wanted the benefit of some of my background in unions. They had known from a friend of mine that I'm from a union state, which is Ohio--and Akron, Ohio, which is the rubber capital of the world--and that my father was a committeeman. Now up there a committeeman has power. You know, up there you got power. Up there you must be a part of the union in order to get hired. The company just can't fire you; the union might, not the company you know. The company reports you to the union. You don't pay your dues, you don't work. That's the way it works up there. So I give them some insight on how unions were run in the state, and the power that the union had, and the need for people to be one, to have a unified force, and how much that you can get done by it. So to those ends I gave a couple of speeches up there on trying to unify the people. Although Mexico has been known at times to have a pretty strong union. It's just that a lot of people just never did get involved in it actively. But the unions are basically strong. In fact, when they go on strike and put that black flag across the

doors, you don't go out or in, see. So to that end they're a lot stronger than what we have here.

'Cause you do have the right to cross their picket line, a lot of times at your own risk. But in Mexico it's law. Put that flag over there, you know, that's it. And here it's not.

S: You were telling me about your friend being in the Juárez jail and being punished or being castigated with the chacharras and all that.

H: Yes. Well, he was forced to talk. They took him on a mountain and with snow, and they wet him down, and they put these cattle prodders on his testicles. And when they put 'em on you, you tell 'em anything /they/ want to hear. In fact, they threatened me with them, and I told them I got a bad heart, that they could put 'em on me if they want to. I told them I got a bad heart. I says, "Not only that, you all know I have never did nothing. So if you feel that you are, go and call a doctor and he'll check me out and testify that I got a bad heart." Which I don't have, but you know, it was a pretty good excuse. It worked, they didn't put 'em on me. But those guys they did, and they confessed. And then I was standing in the office one day when they brought another friend of mine in and they was asking him about theft of some postal orders. And he was telling them he didn't do it, and the guy took out his gun and busted him across the head, just busted across the head. And I just shuddered. And he

says, "Yeah, well what do you want me to say? How many you want me to say you took?" And they hit him again. "You know how many you took." So he got a number and he says, "I took this many." He wasn't the one. I wasn't gonna offer any information 'cause they figure if I knew about it, I know some more. So I just didn't get involved and I just shut up. But back in those days when Chocolate was in there and head of that thing, that was his favorite weapon, la chicharra. And he didn't mind using it on women, on men and he hated Blacks. Indiscriminately.

S: How'd they use it on the women?

H: The same way. They put it down there on the gentile parts of their body or up on their breasts. Same thing. And one incident, and this was in the El Paso papers and El Pasoans were very outraged about it. I remember the incident, it's very fresh in my mind.

/PAUSE/

H: The incident is very fresh in my mind because it came out in the paper. A lot of El Pasoans were incensed by it and didn't like it. What happened one day while I was in the bar drinking like any other person on a Saturday afternoon, the police came in and they started picking up everybody--only Blacks. So I asked what was going on, you know in Spanish. And they told me that here comes el jefe de policia secreta. I know him.

That's the guy's brother I worked with. He says, "Oh, you let him go. He's all right. He's a union official and he's everything, he's cool." So he told me, he says, "Look here, you need to go on home and stay there 'cause we're picking up all blacks." I asked what had happened. He says, "A black killed a girl over here in a hotel." I says, "You're just picking up all blacks?" "Yeah." So I get in my car, I'm going down the street. So I'm getting ready to go over the bridge, they cut me off and stop me again. "Come on, pardner." I says, "Look here, your boss just turn me loose. His name is Jorge Palacios." He says, "We picking up everybody." I says, "Jorge just turned me loose." "I don't know that. Come on." Got in the car and he took me up there. So they got about, oh, 40 blacks in there, lined up. So I go in there and Jorge Palacios sees that, "You back here again?" I says, "Your boys picked me up." And he called them, "Pendejos, I just let him loose." You know. He says, "Anyway, I can use you as an interpreter." You know, 'cause a lot of blacks didn't speak Spanish. And these were mostly soldiers.

So they going and interviewing them, and they had one colonel there and his wife. I don't know why they brought the man's wife. They had been shopping. And that colonel, man, he was mad. He filed charges when he

got back and they hassled it back and forth in the paper a couple of days, why's they pick up a colonel and his wife. But they start turning people loose. They kept some so they get the fine, they kept them so they'd just get the fines.

Now the girl that died in the hotel, her husband who lived in El Paso heard about it and he came over. So they arrested him and says he did it. Now he came over checking on his wife. So they put the chicharras on him and they kept putting them on they kept putting them on. All right. They stopped when they got the autopsy back, they just now getting the autopsy back two or three days later. The girl died of an overdose of pills. She was taking barbituates. She died of overdose. They turned him loose, but they had to transfer him back to El Paso in an ambulance. He couldn't walk. His testicles were swollen that big. So El Paso played it up. He was in the hospital here and it came out here he was sterile, never gonna have babies again. And a lot of blacks were mad about it. I mean for several months you going to Juárez, you just automatically see a cop and you hated him. You be mad at him because of what happened, the way that it happened. And then at the same time the colonel had filed those charges and they had it in El Paso paper. I believe it was the Times, where they want to know why would they arrest a colonel, he showed his ID, and his wife. And you know, it's these

things that happens that, you know, sort of sets your mind off on the way that they go around law enforcement over there. And then you always hear about the mordidas the same way. And it's not only the blacks that go up there--anybody that they get money out of. They wanted the money.

I know a lot of people whether you're white, black, Mexican or whatever, Chinese, have to stop by that tránsito you know, over there. And you hand out two or three bucks, the mordida, no problem. They don't care who you are.

S: Did you ever have any hard incidents with the tránsito?

H: I had several, a lot of incidents with the tránsito.

I have them today.

S: But back then were they pretty hard?

H: Oh, they were...they used to stay and wait for them.

Police'd lay there for you. They stop you /for/ anything, from expired El Paso safety sticker. They don't have no safety inspection there, you know. Talking about safety /inspection/, I told them, "You don't have no safety inspector." They used to ride around in a plain black '53 Ford. This was back in about 1962. It seemed like they always used to just wait on me. They'd come on with that flashlight, say, "Pull over, partner." And I was speeding a lot of times, sometimes I was speeding. A lot of times I wasn't, but you know, they know I didn't like jail. They know I cough up two or three dollars. And when they see me, they'll stop me, 'cause they know they gonna get it.

One time I had to go and get them, go to the bar, my mother-in-law owned a bar over there called Alabama. I had to go in the bar several times, get money from her, and pay the tránsito.

But you know, it still happens today. I was stopped a month ago. They stopped me 'cause I got a El Dorado. When I told them I had no money, open my wallet, I never carry money in my wallet. I just keep a couple of bucks in there. He says, "You got a El Dorado and you dressed all nice and clean, and you ain't got no money?" I says, "Well, I didn't do nothing. I'm driving slow." He says, "Well, we need some money for our gas." They got my car. They stopped me in the downtown section, told me to get in their car. He drove my car and we went out there about a mile. He was going to jack me up. And then he told me, "If any other tránsito stops you tonight, tell him number nine already got you." And sure enough it was about six o'clock that morning, 'cause I was mad at my wife so I stayed out drinking. I pull up a stop sign and I rolled down my window and I was trying to talk to this girl. It wasn't but a couple of seconds, so I seen them. So I'm going to start to pull off, he turned on the light. "Driver's license." "What'd I do?" "You holding up traffic." Nobody behind me at six o'clock in the morning. I says, "Number nine already got me." "Oh, okay." Give me back my license and they took off. (Laughter)

It's a racket. But if you go over there, like my brother-in-law two weeks ago, he got stopped. He went to back out, okay? You know when you back up you look in your rear view mirror? This is what he was doing, looking in his rear view mirror and stuff. They stopped him when he went to pull out. Says, "Why?" "'Cause you didn't look behind you like that." He says, "I'm looking in my rear view mirror. It's the nighttime, you can see lights." "No." So he argued with them. They took him down, they took his car. He called me, he had to pay \$57 bucks to get his car back. This happened just a couple of weeks ago. So that hasn't changed. Just costs more money now. That hasn't changed.

S: Can you tell us about your working experience at Darbyshire and how you got there? Well, actually your work experience after the Army.

H: Oh, well, boy, that's a lot. When I got out of the service I really couldn't find a job that paid anything, even though I had prior college, I was experienced electrician. That's why I was in the Air Force. They wasn't paying any money, they only wanted to hire blacks at the time as janitors. So I finally did take a janitor job 'cause my unemployment ran out. I took a janitor job working for Foodway of El Paso. So I worked there until I got hired at Smelter in 1963.

S: Now, if you please, would you tell us something about every job that you had, like the pay and all that during those years, and if any interesting things happened while

at the job?

H: Not really. Not at that one, at Foodway, anyway.

At Foodway I went there hired as a porter. And this was in the tail end of 1962. I went to work there as a porter. And I worked there stocking, scrubbing the floor, helping put the produce on and everything. That time I was starting out \$1.15 an hour, worked myself up to \$1.35 an hour.

S: What year was that?

H: This was in the tail end of 1962. All right. Then I put an application at Smelter, so I was called to Smelter. And I quit Foodway and I went to work at Smelter. You can't join the union, I believe, for the first 50 working days. When I first went there they put me in the reactor room and it was a great big reactor with about a thousand long rods in there. And that first day I went to work I had no gloves on. We had to pull those rods out and put water on them, shove it back in. After that first day I wanted to quit. The blisters just, I couldn't touch anything without hurting. So I went back that next day, which was a Sunday, and I had gloves on. And you know, I had soaked my blisters. But you know, I liked it, I knew I was going to make some pretty good money. I can't remember my exact wage, but it was three times more than I was making at Foodway. (Laughter) Three times, you know.

So then they put me at a so-called permanent position, which was in the lead department. I was put in the lead

department. And I was supposed to go up and get all the lead powder out, the zinc powder, and tap 'em. So on two days a week when the regular guy was off in the charge hole I had to go over to the charge hole and knock off the slag with a great big, old, long chisel, oh, I guess about 20 feet long. Because of my size, I weighed 190 pounds, very muscular and strong, I used to hit that slag, knock great big slabs off from here to there. That's how big they was, and that wide. Hit it, knock it down. So the foreman got to liking me. The temperature there was about 2500°. That's why you sweat a lot, and I was losing that weight. So he wanted me over there permanently. I don't too much like that much heat, and then the work was very strenuous at the time we're doing it. So I told him I rather stay in my own department, lead department. So he wanted me over there--you know, you don't hassle a foreman.

So one night I was going to work. I was living in Juárez at the time. I had an accident on Paisano, a car came out of a one-way street and hit me. So we asked somebody to call the police. By the time the police got there, the report was made out, I was late to work. And I always used to leave 45 minutes early so I could get there in time. I like taking my time putting my clothes on and be there. I like to be punctual. So I got there late and I had my equipment that I use, you have special equipment you use within a charge hole--

your big thermal gloves and face shield. And I had 'em locked in my locker like I supposed to. So I got there. Now, they dump your slag at smelter on a time table, okay? Now I wasn't there for the dumping, the foreman had to do it. And I was coming in right when he was doing it. And he didn't have the safety equipment on, he got burned. So when I walked in there I says, "Okay, I'll take over now." "Black son of a bitch is always late." When he said that I just hit him. Boom. He fell against a potter furnace and burned his shoulder. So he made his report, and the safety officer told me to come over there when the main supervisor come in the morning, they'd go out and talk about the case. So I worked the rest of my shift. And so I was fired because of negligence. I says, "What about him?" I think he was fired, too. His name was Peters, he was a German. I couldn't get represented by a union because I only had been working there for 46 days, and it takes fifty. I had four days to go.

So I lost that job, went back on unemployment. That played out. And I had a wife at that time, so I got on that job with a friend of mine at a construction company. Took me up there, they needed laborers. So I went up there and he showed me how to drive those dump trucks--five-speed and the brownie and all of that. So then I got on the pneumatic rollers and got to working that and your sheephead. I became a heavy equipment operator.

I worked in New Mexico up until 1966. My wife became pregnant, so I wanted to move back here to El Paso 'cause she was staying here and I was going up there. And I was paying rent here and rent up there, too, see, living up there, because she was from Juárez and we hadn't got her a passport you know, yet. So when she got pregnant we just decided I'm gonna come back here and stay. And I had put in applications at Phelps Dodge and I put in Darbyshire. So I went to Phelps Dodge first to check on a job opening they had, and it was in the tank house, which is acid, you walk on a catwalk over acid. You've got all these fumes coming at you, you know. This is a small catwalk, you just didn't just cross quickly. And one of my buddies had been working there, and the fumes just eat through your clothes. You had to buy clothes every two or three weeks. So I says, "No, let me take Darbyshire."

So at Darbyshire I took the test and I think I scored a 100 on it. And McMinn, Jim McMinn gave me the test, he liked my background okay. So I was hired as a helper. So I'm there as a helper and they put me in a paint yard, scraping steel. And I started working there and they liked me there 'cause I never missed and I was always there, always busy. I was approached to join the union. I didn't join it because the union looked weak to me, the guys didn't have much say-so. I seen a lot of abuses there, and they wouldn't say nothing about it. I say, "What good is the union doing to me?"

S: Can you name any of the abuses you've seen?

H: Oh, I mean how the foreman would talk to them and make fun of them and so forth. You do jobs out of your classifications, and you know, make ethnic jokes about Mexicans and so forth and laugh at you, and put you on a job that you're not supposed to be doing. Abuses of the contract. /I said/ "Hey, this is not supposed to be done this way. Why don't you say something?" "No, might get fired." Men around there you know, you get fired, may have never filed a grievance. Never. Never a grievance have ever been filed. They hadn't been on strike.

And so when the foreman came out and got on me, named Andy, he get to mess around me, I grabbed his scraper, told him to "get your ass and scrape it, 'cause I don't need the job, I'm not gonna take it." So then the men approached me and, "Look, join the union. Might come to be a shop steward. You know more about this." So I joined. Sure enough, I was made a shop steward. I think that first month I filed three grievances--boom, boom, boom. Within three /months/ I had filed seven grievances. The thing about it, we won 'em. So I was going in and winning them things.

S: Do you remember those grievances?

H: Not outright. It was about, some of 'em was wages, and some of 'em about some of our guys showed up late and they was going to be fired or given a couple of days off

of time. No show on a Monday, they accused him of being drunk without even knowing--didn't even telephone home, didn't go to his house. Obvious things, you know. Failure to call in, you know, by a certain time. It wasn't in there. Stuff like you're working too slow, you're not hustling, you're standing around--stuff of this nature. And so this foreman, you know, he'd come at me, jingle at me, and we'd get involved. And the whole shop stopped working. I tell him, "You know what? I click my fingers and everybody'll walk out." And that's how much unity we had got. They see me arguing with him and I'd throw down helmets, and I be pointing at him, 'cause he was short and he'd try to point /at me/. And we go through these hassles and we started winning these grievances.

So the company you know start with... At that time, because I came there and didn't join the union, didn't make too much noise, and I always worked, they hired more blacks. We had about six or seven. But after I joined the union and begin to file these grievances, reading the contract to the company about violating certain articles of the contract, even the computation of overtime and so forth, they never hired another black. And as a black would quit, they would never hire another one. Pretty soon I was the only one there--the only one. For a lot of years I was the only black there, until I asked them to hire this one guy. And I went in there, this is after McMinn had left. And I told Ben Alfrey,

I says, "Sure looks mighty bad I'm the only black here. You don't hire any, it's not because we're outspoken, because we know how to read that contract and know when we're being abused here. Now most of our men here knows what's in that contract. I tell them at every union meeting." I was president of the union then. I says, "So you can't use that as an excuse for not hiring this black guy. 'Cause all our mesa directiva is aware of that contract now, and the gains we have got. They're aware of the articles. And they know they'll come to me or any of the shop steward. Just don't have to be a black now." We try to keep, you know, people up there--Uranga was in there--who had prior college. We have 'em in there who can read and understand that contract, instead of somebody in there just as a figure-head, somebody they can manipulate. And they try to manipulate, try to put pressure on me.

Once they gave a warning. We had a guy there who fainted in the paint yard. His name was Juan, what was Juan's last name?

U: Macinas.

H: Macinas, yeah. He fainted from the fumes there. And so he was sent for observation and so forth. And they didn't want him to come back, 'cause Juan, he's outspoken when he thinks he's being abused, he'll let you know. He let a couple of them foreman know. Now the Anglos don't

like that, no dude talking back about his rights and so forth. So they refused him admittance to the plant one day to see me. So I went and asked my foreman can I go out to the gate and see him? He said, "Sure. You're chief shop steward." I can walk all over the plant, but I got to tell them where I'm going to be at.

So I go down there and I go in the office and me and him talk. Vice President sees me. Boom. I filed a grievance. Next day I come out, here come those short McMinn out there, Peter. "What are you doing?" "Giving you a warning for leaving your job." "You're nuts. I had permission to go out there." "You what? You did not." I says, "I did." "You did not. I didn't give it to you." I says, "My foreman gave it to me. You're a superintendent. My foreman gave it to me." "Who?" "Andy. You want to ask Andy?" And he says, "Yeah." So they get going down there. So they gave Andy the warning and Andy posted it in his office. They gave the foreman a warning. I filed a grievance, we won that grievance. Got the man back. No problem. But they tried to get rid of me, through that.

They offered me [a] foreman [position] several times. I didn't offer 'cause I know I'm going to be a foreman about two days. I'm going to get fired. We had arguments with Jack Darbyshire. I used to...right in the

middle of the floor. I didn't care if he owned everything. But when I argued I knew what position I was in by that contract, 'cause I used to come home here and just study. Where is the loophole? And I looked for it. And I get some labor books and I looked for it. And when I wrote my grievances up I was ready. I didn't have no outside help. I didn't have no lawyer. I was the only lawyer. And I, we had, that local had a pretty good batting average on winning those arbitration cases. I mean we won some cliffhangers. That's right.

S: Which local is that?

H: Local 216, International Brotherhood of Boilermakers. If you ever want to see a local stuck together, those guys stuck together. One time I went up there and I says, "When I wave my hand everybody walk out." They stopped all machinery, just waited till the argument was over. He says, "Put them back to work." I says, "No. We're gonna settle this right now. Right now." And we settled. They try to fire guys who would file grievances, or that they figured that was real true blue to the union and they'd get something on him and try to get him out. Several times. They hated Uranga's guts. That's right.

S: So what was your position at the Local 216?

H: I ended up...well, what I left at was president. I was president of the local. But I held the position of shop steward and then I moved up to chief shop steward, and

then I moved up to president of the local. I unseated a guy who had been president for many years. But he was lackadaisical in the job. He just didn't get it done. He'd be hoodwinked by the company. They would threaten him and bowl him over.

Now we had a successful strike. What year's that first strike? Was it in '69?

U: '69 I think it was, the first one.

H: We had a strike there. We won it from the company. Police were called in, we were threatened and everything. But we made out through it. We had gas allowances for people making trips and we worked together. We had costales of frijoles donated to us.

U: Burritos and menudo.

H: Yeah. We had comidas down there, you know, and everything. And the guys really stuck together. There was some who went across the picket line because of family and so forth, and their wives, you know, they'd get uptight about paying bills. But we made it through. I was on the negotiating team and a couple of the unions tried to get me thrown off the negotiating team, because I was the mouth there. I was the one who had the calculator who figured everything out, see, because my background is math. And when they throw out a package or want to put an article in there, "No, no I

see a loophole in it." That's the reason why they tried to meet once without telling me, you know. And so we had incidents like that that happened, that was very obvious. But I was always outspoken. I've always fought for the underdog. I don't like misery and I don't like people to be messed over and to be taken advantage of. I've never like that. I don't care what the race of people is. And I'm going to be like that till the day I die. I'm soft hearted and I got the reputation of being on that plant muy concha, you know. And I got that around there. I guess I'm going to be that way till I die. I'm a easy sucker or easy mark for confidence game too. I believe in people, see. But then it's a certain way what they'll say or it's certain actions which will make me apprehensive about people in high places, when I know it's gonna benefit them. And I was always that way to the company, see.

S: Do you remember any incidents during that first strike in 1969 that might have happened?

H: Well, it was nothing that was really flagrant. We had some clubs once. We was gonna get shot by a guard.

S: Can you tell me that incident?

H: Well, it was the guard who'd always been friendly, all this other time, you know. He used to be real friendly till the time of the strike. Time of the strike, I guess he must have felt like the riot police, you know. We're

outside on /public/ property. And what we were doing, as cars or trucks come in to do business with the company, we would merely say to 'em, on public property, wasn't on company property, on public property, "Local 216 on strike. Would you please respect our picket line?" That's all. If they didn't, went in, well, we didn't molest them. Let them. Just walk back and forth.

So he come out there and come tell us what he's going to do. He's going to get his pistol. Well, hell, we had them old clubs. They called the police and they took that old boy. We told them at the negotiating table, "Next time we're gonna have a pistol, we're gonna shoot him." Anyway they took his pistol and stuff away from him, because we was for real. Now a couple of the guys did bring a pistol. They did. Wanted to shoot him. That's right. When he came out _____, "Oh, on public property," They were gonna try to grab us and put a pistol on somebody. That's right.

S: They put the pistol on who?

H: He put it on there. I don't I forget who was up on the picket line. Since I was a shop steward I didn't have to walk picket. I can't recall from '69 who was on picket at the time. But when we seen it, our guys rushed over, we wasn't going to take it like that. Incidents like that, it's a sacrifice. You know, when you're on strike nothing too much good really comes out

of it as far as bringing the company and the union closer. We know it's going to be friction. We know it may be strike breakers. We know this. We know that we may have to bust a couple of heads to protect your job. Okay. Like I said, you know, I was raised in a union town, I have seen it, I have seen heads busted. They had one day there they said Market Street ran red with blood; 15, 16 people were killed. And this was after a lengthy strike up there. When those rubber company goes on strike, everybody's out of there. And they don't too much worry about people crossing that picket line. And the thing you don't want to do up there, you got a hundred men, 200, 300 on one gate at a picket line, you don't want to cross that picket line. Not up there. You going with your life, you might as well forget it, 'cause they gonna get you. Liable to shoot you right there and don't get no time whatever.

The union back North is big business, is big money, and its solidarity, it's exactly what it is. That's the name of the game. And that's the reason why that back North the standard of wages, economic levels, is a lot higher than it is in the Southwest and the Southern states, because of the solidarity of the unions. Because they will go out, and because people do not cross that picket line because they know when you do, you probably won't come home to see your family. They did have a program

on here a couple of months ago about that miners deal up there in that one place up there near West Virginia, and that's true. They have armed guards up there taking pot shots, guards take pot shots, the miners take pot shots. Because Ohio's right next to West Virginia, you know. We even consider it like that was part of Ohio. They got a lot of mines up there. And they will shoot. Because if you let one come across, here comes the next one, here comes the next one, here comes the next one, then you out of a job. But they're solid and they stick together. And the unions have benefits up there that people down here in El Paso would drop dead. My uncle before he died, he gets 13 weeks vacation, paid vacation. He works for U.S. Steel in Lorraine, Ohio. Thirteen weeks paid vacation. Now can you imagine something like that? You don't have that stuff down here. You get every holiday in the book off up there, just like if you was a federal government employee. And you have that.

Now you know, they're making the money. Now what mostly the big union up there are trying to do is get a shorter work week. There's not too many more benefits they can get. My uncle was down here, he says, "I can't stand 13 weeks 'cause I'm busted." He asked for all his money up in the front. And spent it, see. And you know, they don't have too many more benefits to

go to, so now they're trying to the shorter work week now. And they're doing 'cause there's not too much to ask for up there. They got the wages, you know, way high and everything. There's a difference between night and day between the unions up there and what you got here in El Paso or in Texas. That's throughout Texas.

U: Melvin, remember for example what the company used to do before negotiating, two or three days before the end of the contract? Remember they used to take all our jobs out and put them on the warehouse and then say, "No more work."

H: That's right. They used to come out, say we were out of work. "There's going to be a lay-off. Ship the steel out." They would try to threaten you, threaten this. And I was always threatened in there. You know, I'm going to lose my... And I says, "Well, I'm not going to be the only one." And the company used to go down there and just check to see where I was at on that seniority list. But I had so many years in by then, they had to bump a lot of people.

But I'll tell you what they did do me for a long time. They lowered me down from a painter back to a helper. See, but I didn't have that much time where I could bump anybody. My compadre had 15, 20 years, you know. So you know, I got it, the shaft. I was back down there and they kept me there for a long time.

And then when they made me fitter, here they go with another strike. Sure enough after that striking stuff was over, boom, they put me back to helper, made me suffer with that low pay and scraping and everything. And there I was a fitter, working my tail off. But they made me pay for it. So then I scuffled up and says, "We got to have a standard set where we can get to be A fitters." And I twisted around till I made them give us a test. I said, "Now you get me." A fitter. Made that limit, got up there. Now, all B fitter got to go. They was trying their best to get all you union officers laid off, to get us out of there. But see, they had to lose over half of the work force, 'cause we told them we gonna bump the foundry. They was trying to get a special deal where we couldn't bump the foundry, okay? They was trying to get them to cut us. I says, "Men, no way. Uh-uh." See the foundry union, the motorists wasn't worth nothing. The teamsters who were so big and bad in every other state is not worth a damn in El Paso. They're cowards. They crossed the picket line. Okay. The machinists are the only ones that had some nerve in everything. But after a while we told them we might as well go back. They stuck with us a long time during this last strike.

S: Can you tell us about this last strike, which is the one that I believe lasted longer and has in fact hit more people?

How did it originate?

H: It did affect a lot of people and was one of our more valued strikes, if you want to call it that.

S: What year was that?

H: Lengthy. Happened '76, the year of the Lord, 1976. We were negotiating it a lengthy time. We started I guess a little bit before Christmas.

G: How long did that strike take?

H: I don't know the exact dates, because it never really ended, since the boilermakers...we say unofficially ended the strike after six, seven, eight months. But it was lengthy. But we started negotiating a contract around December '75, and we had made some inroads in it. Now at this time the company had got a new lawyer. Before we had been negotiating with Scoggins and his company. He's Employers Association.

S: Skip Scoggins.

H: Yeah. He was a stone fool. See, he was a stone fool. He go in there, he come in negotiating, beat on his chest. "My way. I'm the great white man. You all are nothing." And me and him have it out, and every trick of the trade, I beat him at it. Beat him at it. And we made most of our gains under Scoggins.

They got a hold of Thurman. Billy, Billy Thurman. Which he was very articulate to a certain way. But he's one of these old Southwestern boys, cowboy, like on a personal friendship basis with Jack Darbyshire and McMinn.

And he told the company, "Hold out. You need to break them." At this time Darbyshire had been purchased by another company, which was Kansas City Structure Steel from Kansas City, okay? So they had been purchased. And so they wanted to break our labor movement 'cause we was getting some national attention Texas-wise and up to Rio Grande Steel in New Mexico, on how well-knit and how close our union was. In fact, they were so scared of us, I had representatives from the union from that Kansas City Steel come up and talk to me, see if we want to unite with them, 'cause they was scared that we gonna take a lot of their work, and how many union cases we had won and our caliber of work. Well, when we negotiating a contract we point everything out to the company. "We give you a hundred percent now, but /we'll/ try for 120 percent. We guarantee an uppage in production." They said they couldn't come up with the wages. "We'll guarantee by upping it." We said, "You know that we're the best in the Southwest."

And we were. We getting contracts all far away. Nobody in El Paso area could handle the tonnage we could handle. Couldn't turn the steel. Couldn't make the tanks. Couldn't do the welds. Our welds were certified. They could come in with any kind of X-ray equipment, anything else they wanted. We had the fitters could make anything you could put on a blueprint. If it's

on a blueprint, we can make it. We had guys there had 30, 35 years experience. And a fitter who's a trainee worked under this guy to learn his tricks, younger guys, would find a better way to do it with more strength, you know. Now we learned from them. We didn't go to no special school. We learned on-the-job training, learned the way to do it. We could take a torch and make a cut that look like it was done with a machine. We make our own jigs, our own inventions to make better burns and cuts. We were a production shop. We're very proud of our record. They called me here time to time, had the meetings, and pat us on the back, "Job well done."

A lot of your most biggest structures in El Paso was done by Daryshire Steel and us workers. Your big banks down there. Civic Center. Okay? Those welds that are busting are not ours, they're Field Welds. We did that. We broke our backs for that company. And we told them, "Okay, we need the pay, cost of living is come up." I brought them my grocery list. And they asked me, this is what McMinn said that burned me. He says, "Why can't /you/ buy stuff in Juárez?" I says, "Man, I buy Safeway. I like to eat, my family likes to eat." "Why don't you go to Juárez and buy it?" Well, that's what he did, and I wasn't going to buy second-rate food to produce for them so they can live in a \$100,000 house. I told them, "I don't want much."

I don't want to drive a brand new car, but I'm tired of driving the piece of junk I got. I like to eat, you know, pretty good meat." I said, "But the way it is now, hell, I qualify for food stamps. I got kids who gonna want to go to college. We don't have no pension plan." We brought all this out to them. We brought statistics out to them. We brought where they can do it.

We started getting them down, so Thurman, the lawyer, started messing around in there. All of a sudden everybody who was on the mesa directiva, those were the ones they wanted to cut. They think that all everybody else was gonna take this rate increase and they was gonna screw the class A's, a certain classification in the class A's, a certain classification in the class B's, see. The men wouldn't go for it. They wanted to hold the pension plan in abeyance. And this was one of the parts we said we had to get hook or crook. Our guys out there had a average of 45 to 50 years old. Then need a job. Now we had guys that were 70 years old, okay? Nothing to fall back on. We needed it. Now we's only asking a nickel a hour. We matching nickel with their nickel. All right? And this is at the time when the government was putting mandatory pension plans in lot of plants. But because of the amount of personnel we had we didn't qualify. But we had the

guidelines for it. And they wanted to set it off. We got in there.

So I was here one night, my International rep calls me. "Hey, a deal's been made." I get a long distance call. So they tell me the deal. I says, "Well, I think we can swallow that. Tell them to put it on the table." I go the next day, smile on my face, "Hey this thing going to be settled, they are going to put it on the table." They didn't put that package on the table. Here we go arguing. We get down where we going to go on strike. All of a sudden here come International Rep. He had said before we did everything legal, in telling the strike and advising the federal mediators. And now he says, "Well, yes we did. Last month when we took a strike vote, well, it may not be..." He didn't want us to go on strike. He'd got mad and walked out. "The hell with you assholes. I'm going back to California." I says, "Man you called me long distance, says this is going to be on the table. This wasn't on the table. These guys not gonna accept this in here like that. It's no way. There's something going on behind somebody's back."

One thing what we are looking at, this plan right here, Darbyshire's 90 percent minority--puro Chicano and two black. The one in Kansas City is reversed. It's 95 percent Anglo. The one in Rio Grande is about

85 percent Anglo. Now the workers in Rio Grande, the workers in Kansas City, have been here to see me because we do better work than they are, and they want to see can we handle their work in case they ever go on strike, and can we put them out 'cause we work for a cheaper base, about \$2 an hour. Now them white guys getting all this money and all those benefits and all these extra days--day after Thanksgiving, I got a copy of their contract, up at Rio Grande, had a copy of their contract--boy, it beats us to death. But here, you know, the Mexicans and two blacks down here are not getting nothing, and we're the quality workers. They would send steel they couldn't do at Rio Grande down to us to do 'cause they couldn't do it, but we're not getting the pay. Now we supposed to swallow this 'cause we're minority, we're El Paso, we're a border city. We supposed to go and cross them by and eat in Juárez. This was told to us on the negotiating table. It gets you. Here's a big man, all the money, a Jew, telling you something like this. He ain't never been there across a day in his life down in Juárez buying a cut, he up there in Coronado Meat wanting to buy prime rib, see? And I got to buy a chuck. You got to beat like hell. Boop, boop, boop. And we told them no. Especially after we got a hold of those two contracts and seen the wage differential and how many holidays and vacation.

/They were/ screwing us all the way.

And this is the main thing that kept us together. It's not right. Why do you always want to take advantage of the minority any way, hook or crook. There's got to be a better way. We says, "We willing to take some of your pay stuff here, but let's just make it a one year contract." They says, "No." "Well, two year." They want a mandatory three year or nothing. We says, "Well, nothing. We're not going for it. We're not gonna be tied hand and foot on that contract for no three years." We was gonna take a wage _____, they didn't want a wage _____. /So we went on strike./ Everything was working smooth. International rep wouldn't have nothing to do with us, so I fired up a report up there. So negotiations opened back up again in a different light.

They sent us another guy down here, he hated blacks. He told the secretary-treasurer of our local. One day he was driving by and a black guy was across the street, "Why don't you hit that nigger and kill him." He called me some names--nigger this and all that. "Armando Avila would make a good president. Let's get the nigger out of here. He gonna mess everything up." Me and Armando we got drunk together, went and chased women together, went to bars together, been working together side by side for 10 years, you understand. We had done all this

for 10 years, and he's telling this guy that. Mando can't wait to get back and tell /me/. I gets mad and I fine off a report to the International president on this, filing charges against this white guy. So he comes in with his head down. "Harris, I didn't mean it like that. I didn't actually say that." And I told 'em in the face, "Yes, you did, too. Do you remember where this and this?"

So this stuff starts going on, and hell, International trying to get charges on me of ripping off money. They held a court, all this stuff, trying to get me. My International trying to get me, now. Here's a local down here and that's running haywire. They don't follow what the International says. They following a black messiah down there. I'm controlling four locals. So they finally get down to one day we negotiating, and the Teamsters say on the table, "We're not respecting your picket line. We're rolling our trucks across." I says, "Well, if you all want to, go back to work, don't roll the trucks but respect the picket lines." Motorists says, "No, we're turning coat." The machinists held with us. Two locals out still on strike.

Next thing I know, boom, Teamsters go in there. But what breaks it--and we took a picture of them, gets them in the paper--a International representative walks across the picket line. I made the statement

in the papers, was in the papers. I received threats from Teamsters. "I been a Teamster for 20 years. We don't like this. We're not cowards," and so on. I said, "Well, we got a moving camera picture of your International representative going across the picket stand, with a picket sign right there. Sure do." He says, "We need to get him out." I had threats on my life and I was carrying a pistol. I had my kids instead of sleeping in bedrooms, sleeping in the hallway. Every time a car pull up to me, I'd take off; or slow up, put on the breaks real fast. My wife was paranoid. Some bricks came through the window here. So forth. They got rid of that guy, the International rep, Nino Anchondo, if you want to know. He had run here for City Council and they asked me about him, and I told them about him. I'll tell it again to anybody else that wants to hear. He's a two-faced dog. Anytime that you are a International rep, okay; if you work and cross it, okay. But you an International rep, you take an oath not to cross any picket line. Like I took an oath as a president. I took an oath. When I initiate any member, they take an oath. But he walked across that picket line. I told him he was going to roll.

We had violence after this. We had some broken windshields, we had some guys, scabs, come across with rifles in their car, and we knew some of our guys had

pistols, you know, in there. Now the company gets around the strike where you don't have to cross the picket line. All he can say, "We building up something in our company." And they open another gate and they call it a construction gate. And they can legally go in that gate, we can't put a picket on that construction gate. At one time they was having workers going in that gate. So when they did that, we put pickets on that gate. They called sheriff's deputies out on us and everything. We used follow cars, trucks--surveillance. Take license plates numbers. We were well organized, very well organized strike. What broke was the two unions really, the Molders and the Teamsters, when they crossed the picket line.

Now since then I've heard a big movement was made to break Local 216 because we were one hell of a known local, coming into attention Texas-wide, for being a small local of minorities. We had a very good record of winning arbitration cases and grievances. We had won 70 percent of arbitration and grievance cases that we filed. In other words, that proved that we just didn't file on them because we wanted to file them. Seventy percent speaks for itself. And I was the proud author of them, okay? Also we were filing grievances for another union altogether, the Molders. They couldn't file their own grievances, so I would write

them and they would file them. The company knew this, okay? I also wrote and filed for the Machinists, grievances. All right. So in Local 216 I was becoming wide known. So the Kansas City president there had put out...I think his name was Fitz or Fitzgerald or something, wanted us broke. Now a deal was made where the strike would be ended. This was in negotiations. Strike would be ended, we signed the contract, and all persons would be called back to work. Thurman gave us this. The company did not live up to it. Everybody was not called back to work. No member of the mesa directiva was called back to work. Nobody that had ever filed a grievance against the company was ever called back to work. Nobody who had ever voiced their rights to the company was ever called back to work. That sure seems mighty funny, don't it? Now the main ones was called back to work was people more than 20 years, 25 years, whom they needed to run that plant. Those are the ones they were calling back.

Now that was a very hard experience. I was blackballed in El Paso, I couldn't get a job. Every time I put Darbyshire on there, Darbyshire had told them I had left the company two times without their permission. It's on my personnel record. Now I probably gonna file against it. That one instance where that foreman I told you about, Andy Mill, was given the warning. I got still living proof of that Andy Mill, you know. Still living

proof of it, who's no longer with Darbyshire. Jim McMinn, who was got rid of by Darbyshire. So he has animosity toward them. Those are my proof, okay? So that's one.

Another one is a warning that Julio Fernandez refused to sign. I went to have a dispute, I was called in. Now they say that I didn't want to stay in my work area. Now who can I go to see to get permission to go handle that? I'm chief shop steward. I had to do it all. I was president of the union and chief shop steward. I had both roles, okay? Now the union did this, the local did this, so I would have three extra years seniority so they couldn't lay me off. That's the reason why I had the dual position. Them guys made sure; they knew, they figured if they lose me, the union is going to pot. I'm not there now and the union is no longer there. The company do what they damn well please with the guys. So they were right, actually. I'm no longer there, they can't voice anything. And they don't voice it, on a fear of being fired. So the local had this with the two positions so that I'd have those extra years as seniority when it comes to lay off time. So the company couldn't lay me off. See, that adds more years. So given that three years lay off, gotta screw another 50, 60 guys before they can get to me, see. So they did that as a protection to me. And for that protection, I didn't

let my people down. And I call them my people 'cause they was my people. Hell, we done drunk and went out and stayed all night. We done went through strikes together and had bricks thrown at us together, threw bricks together.

S: When did you guys have bricks thrown at you?

H: Hell, yes, he had some thrown back at us. We had pictures taken of us.

U: Oh, every day, every day.

H: Things reported. They was on top of the building, the company was taking pictures of who showed up at the picket line. And they kept this. Who showed up every day at the picket line. Not only for their own duty, but who showed up every day. And those are some of the ones that wasn't called back either.

S: You were telling me before that the raises that you were getting was half a penny per year.

H: Well, this is about a little bit before my time. I think they stopped it by the time I got in there. But they used to give a half a penny raise.

U: Per year.

H: Per year. And this is the kind of raised they were getting until we got in there and we got out shop steward and stuff together, and we start negotiating and we start getting better raises--dime, 11 cents, 15 cents, you know, going up there. That was /what/ that first strike was all about. Twenty cents, you know. At that time we

hadn't had nothing like that, but these guys, half a penny raise. When you get to a certain part they'll go back and count your half a pennies. Now, they cut it off after a while, and I caught it. Something somewhere occurred to me and I says, "Hey, you was here when you was getting that half a penny raise. Why is George over here receiving this raise and you're receiving this?" So I went back and did a investigative study. I found out, hell, the company owed these men a lot of money. So we went and filed a grievance. And the company had a head start and said, "Okay, let's see if we can make a settlement." So I asked the guys, "Would you agree to a couple of hundred bucks, three, four, five hundred, six hundred?" "Yeah." They did. Satisfied. I went and got, oh, I guess about 15, 20 guys all this back money over the period of years for this. I didn't have accurate records, and naturally the company wasn't going to present them to me, accurate records. But they took advantage of these people, actually took advantage of 'em.

Another thing we found out during negotiations, the company was getting a kickback on Blue Cross/Blue Shield Insurance Company. This got us mad, see, this got us mad. The office personnel for one thing, wanted to join our group, okay? Our group had a younger rate than them old guys up there, so they was getting

a cheaper insurance. But if we didn't use so much, the company got a kickback to it. Instead of giving it back to us and buying more benefits, the company kept it. I didn't find this out except during negotiations. I found out on the side from the insurance representative. I put this on the table, you know, "Hey, you come up with this money and not put it back up there." We had a big hassle about it. This was another thing we went on strike for. They played us for fools. They took us for fools. Another reason why we went on strike, for that insurance, because of the kickbacks amounted, hell, to about \$40,000 bucks. They taking from poor people. And we says, "Okay, buy us more insurance with it." We didn't want the money in the pocket. "Buy us some more insurance with it. Make our rates go down." Hell, no. They said, "Aqua tomada, agua gastada." Exactly what they said. Forget it. I says, "No way. We're tired of being your fools." You know, it leads to distrust. And that's exactly what it was.

And then after the strike was over, you know, I've seen agents since then. You know. Me and them get along all right. I went to work at another steel company as foreman. Miranda called me and says, "We recommended you there." We went in there, production went up 20 percent.

S: Where was this at?

H: Toltec Steel Company. I never was on the guys because

they know that I'm on their side due to the fact I worked with them for 10 years, due to the fact I know their needs. And you don't have to never work over no guys back. If he respects you, it's no problem. He's going to produce to make you look good 'cause they don't want no chicken shit guy there. And those guys on their own put the production up 20 percent.

All right. All of a sudden I'm called in one day, "Hey, you're no longer needed." First /Darbyshire/ couldn't believe I was foreman over there. But they delivered some stuff over there, seen me, went back over there and had some guys ask me. "Yeah, I'm over there." And then some of their foreman started to ask our truck drivers /Is that/ black guy over there, Harris?" "Yeah. Doing a great job." We turned out stuff that Toltec had never turned out before. They got some of the best welders over there, some of the best fitters. We had a guy, a monkey, Chavarría. Climb them grids, walk on there like a cat. Fix them overhead cranes, you know. And here we are turning out this stuff. And he calls me in there.

Another thing, Toltec was buying stolen steel. I didn't go look for it. Only they wanted me to go over there and count what we needed coming in. So we'd check them drawings, and they started working

with Darbyshire. Don Stephens came in over there, seen me there, so he verified I was there. Boom. Next thing I know, I'm called in. "Hey, no need for you. You're not driving your men enough." So I asked him, I says, "Is the production up?" He says, "Yes." I says, "Can you tell me about how much." "I don't know exactly. It's between 15 and 20 percent. But you can get more, you're not doing it, because they're buddy buddy with you." Another thing, they came at me and told me to quit eating lunch with my men. I couldn't eat lunch with them. I used to go out there and eat lunch with them. I had to go eat in my office alone. That was the first indication I got when they told me, "Hey, you eat lunch with them guys." What difference was it who I eat lunch with, you know. They told me, "Don't do it." Other foremans there had a company truck. I didn't get none.

Okay. I found some stolen equipment, told them who had it. Told the company, "That shows you where my heart's at." All right. That made no difference when I was coming out of the fire. Darbyshire had put pressure on them, says, "We going to throw some work your way." Now I got this from a very close friend of mine who's still there, reason why I can't give out the name. He's an officer. So you know, I got canned. I says, "Well, the hell with all you all."

After that I seen Don Stephens, he told me,
"Yes, we shafted you." 'Cause he's no longer
with the company. He was a vice-president, by
the way. He was fired. He was fired about some
money. He didn't even control the money. McGrimman
controls the money, he was the finance vice-president.
He didn't control the money, not Don Stephens. Don
Stephens had a lot interest in the company. /He'd/
been there what, 30 years?

U: Thirty years.

H: You understand? He told me, he says, "Yes, we had
to get you." He says, "Yes, it was McGrimman."
He says, "Harris, me and you have always been able
to get along. And most of your concessions, you
talked to me like a man and I gave them to you."
I says, "You're right, Don. Our hassle was never
with you, never with you. Never." And he was
always out there, even in prior negotiations. Used
to get mad at him, you know. They used to tell me,
"Hey, Harris, when I tell you that's all you can get,
I'm saying that in a real way." I believe him. I
don't believe that Jew up there, Darbyshire, and I
don't believe McGrimman. See, he was born poor.
East Texas bastard.

But anyway, I was told, officially now, that they
got my job there. That's one job that they couldn't
get--teaching. You know, you can put down on there

why you left your other job, okay. You understand? You don't put that down on the application. He's going by my credentials. I guess if they could get it they would. But they didn't. Okay, I was going to get a nighttime job, too, to supplement my teaching, since being out of work a year and something. I went to work for the school in '77. Naturally I was a little financially poop, poop, poop. All right. So I went down to the trade schools, El Paso Trade Schools, on Texas Street, talked to a guy named Rick and filed an application. He called me back down there for interview. He says, "Darbyshire told us that you left the plant two times and that you were a troublemaker." I says, "Will you testify to this?" He says, "I sure will." He says, "But, my boss says not to hire you." He says, "But I will testify to what the personnel department told me, and it's on your personnel record." So I know why I never got jobs at anyplace else. I put in there for a position up here for an interview up at Coronado Towers once. And I got all the qualifications-- education, Associate's Degree and everything, and all of these credentials. I was never called on. My versatility, bilingual. And he had told me up to that time--well, I filled out the application get my interview then--that I had what he was looking for,

he hadn't had nobody who was bilingual the way he wanted it, okay? And so forth, and the experience in the El Paso area that I had, and with working with the people that way I had. But I never did hear anything about it. I called back, "Oh, we have somebody else."

S: Do you presently have a good job?

H: Yes, I'm a teacher for the El Paso Public Schools. I like it. In fact, Darbyshire did me a favor, really. If I had the 10 years I spent with them as a teacher, I'd be up in a \$17,000 bracket now, and you only work 183 days, six hours a day.

S: Thank you very much. On behalf of the Institute of Oral History we'd like to thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

H: I'm grateful myself to go down in history a little bit.

S: Thank you.