

11-12-1980

## Interview no. 701

L' Jon Walker Veloz

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: L'Jon Walker Veloz  
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martinez  
PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 12, 1980  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
TAPE NO.: 701  
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 701

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

El Paso Schoolteacher.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

How she came to El Paso from Denton; experiences teaching Mexican American children in El Paso; first impressions of El Paso; how she met her husband; extensive narrative describing how her husband's car was stolen in El Paso and how she accidentally saw it in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, in the possession of the Mexican Federal police in Coahuila; how the car was eventually recovered.

Length of interview: 50 minutes Length of transcript: 34

L'Jon Walker Veloz  
by Oscar J. Martinez  
November 12, 1980

M: First of all Mrs. Veloz, where are you from? Are you from the border area, from around here?

V: No, originally I was from Marshall, Texas, I was born in Marshall, in east Texas. And then I moved to Denton and went through high school and college in Denton, and then moved out here in '59.

M: What brought you to the border?

V: Well, my sister lived out here. She's Congressman Richard White's wife, his first wife. And she'd moved out here and married. And I was teaching school at home at the time and she told me why didn't I come out here, I'd be an old maid all my life if I stayed home. (Chuckles) So I came out here because she lived out here. And I came out here to teach school at Coldwell Elementary School.

M: Now, where is Coldwell?

V: It's on Altura Street.

M: And this is what part of the city?

V: Well, I don't know, I guess this is called central.

M: Is it the Austin High School district?

V: Yes, it's the Austin High School district. It's very near Austin High School. The children that we had in Coldwell go straight to Austin High when they get through with junior high.

M: This is aside from the main focus of the interview, but I'm interested in the schools in El Paso. When you first came here to teach, what kind of a school was Coldwell?

- V: When I came to teach? Well, it was about half Mexican American and half Anglo, about. I would say now, at the present time it's more heavily populated with Mexican American, but at the time, in 1959, I taught four years there and it was about half and half, perhaps, at that time.
- M: What initial impressions can you recall from that time when you first arrived at the school?
- V: Oh, at my school? Well, I liked it very much. I was the only single teacher at the time and the youngest one. And all the other teachers were, you know, a lot older, much older than I. And of course I never had taught Mexican American children before, either. And I noticed that they seemed very obedient and very much. . .oh, they had a lot of respect for the teacher, and you had a lot of backing, you know, from the parents. And I found them, you know, very easy to work with. I liked working with them. I had been in Mexico the summer before I moved out here and went to school at the national university. But at that time I didn't know any Spanish, but I was familiar with the Mexican culture. And when I came here I still didn't know too much Spanish, which I've learned some since. But I was familiar with the Mexican culture a little bit because of living three months in Mexico City.
- M: Has that school undergone significant changes since you first arrived?

V: Yes, a lot. They built the North-South Freeway on one side and took off a little bit of the playground. And the neighborhood has changed. I guess most of the Anglos have moved out or either have. . .the children, people who lived there, the children have grown up probably, a combination of both. And they have a more Mexican American population, so I'm told by the other teachers. And then of course the principal, Miss Crockett, retired, too. She'd been there many years.

M: But you don't teach there any more?

V: No, I teach in the Ysleta system at Mesa Vista. And we have about 98 percent Mexican American there. I have Title I Reading.

M: Over the years in your teaching experience in El Paso, do you have any experiences that stand out in your mind that you consider significant, that you'd like to tell about? In teaching Mexican American students in this particular area, any incidents that might have occurred over the years or any outstanding, memorable experiences.

V: Well, I remember one thing. I lived right across the street from Coldwell, and I had a little apartment behind a woman's home, a family's home. And I remember like if I was sick or something for a couple or three days, the little children would come over after school. And I was, you know, we wouldn't open the door to let 'em in cause I didn't want 'em to catch anything. And they would send me notes and stick notes through the cracks and through the hole. I'd

open the door a little bit and they would send me notes, you know, get well notes. And then I invited 'em to come over one time during recess. We'd talk across the street and we came in and had punch and cookies there in my little apartment, and they seemed to enjoy that, 'cause I lived so close. And you know, I became very friendly and I remembered, of course, a lot of the students. One of the teachers we have right now at our school at Mesa Vista teaches Speech Therapy and she got married about two summers ago, and I said, "Who did you marry, Rubina?" She said, "Oh, I married Albert Rodríguez." And I said, "Oh, I taught an Albert Rodríguez in third grade at Coldwell." And sure enough, it was the same one. (Laughter) It was her husband.

M: Oh, you remembered.

V: Yeah, I remembered. One thing interesting when I moved to El Paso, that the city itself, when I first came out here to visit, that impressed me very much coming from east Texas and of course the Denton area, too, was in the city, you know, it looked very much like a Mexican city perhaps in Mexico, the downtown area, because they had so many Mexican Americans plus the Mexicans from Juárez coming over to buy. And at that time you could scramble, go from one corner to the other, catty-corner, and the lights would all turn red, and the cars would stop and you could go either way, criss cross either way. And that impressed me, I'd never seen that before, and I never had seen you know, so many people from another country. And it seemed more like a Mexican

town than it did a town in Texas that I had been familiar with.

M: How did you meet your husband?

V: Well, as I said, I was teaching at Coldwell and the only single teacher at the time, and everyone there was getting me blind dates with friends of theirs. And so this one woman who was not a teacher, but she was a medical librarian at William Beaumont Hospital, she was working there at Beaumont, and my husband was practicing in Juarez. He was chief of the pediatric department at the Seguro Social. And so he would go over to the medical library at William Beaumont Hospital and check out journals in English. He couldn't speak English, but he could read English fluently. And so she would let him take journals and medical books over to Juarez you know, and everything. And she was very impressed with him. And he was 35 at the time and never had been married, and I was 28. And she wanted me to meet him and introduce me to him. And we went over to Juarez to a party at a doctor's house. And if you've ever been in any of the parties in Juarez, all the men get in one room and the women in the other, and you don't even talk to anyone of the opposite sex. I thought, "I'll never get to meet him." So finally this woman, Mrs. Flynn, Pat Flynn's her name, she finally just took me by the hand and said, "Come over here, I want you to meet Dr. Veloz." So we sat in the corner of a room and talked. I don't know how we talked because he knew very little English and I didn't know any Spanish hardly. But we talked about two hours. And then about, oh, seven or

eight months later we got married. Everybody thought it was gonna be a disaster. My parents didn't want me to marry him and I guess his didn't want him to marry me, either. But we've been married 18 years!

M: I guess you can communicate better now.

V: Yeah. Well, he's learned a lot of English and I've learned some Spanish, too, since then. But I didn't know, my mother-in-law, none of them knew any English when I went down to visit them, except one cousin who went to school in Eagle Pass there, off from Piedras Negras.

M: That's really interesting. Okay, if we can talk about this very interesting incident that you went through in Mexico I'm referring to the car that was stolen from you. Was it in 1978?

V: Yes.

M: Could you first describe the car and then just tell me the story, just what happened.

V: Okay. Well, my husband had talked about this, buying this car for months and months. That's all we heard at the supper table, about this Continental Mark V he was gonna buy. So he would bring catalogs and find out the color and so forth. So anyway, finally he bought this cream colored Lincoln Continental Mark V. It was I guess a 1978. And it was beautiful; had, you know, vinyl top, it was really the prettiest car I guess I've ever seen. Although cars, I'm not too much interested in cars, but he's very impressed with pretty cars. So he bought it. And he, well, he went down to Houston to get it and our son went with him. And they drove it back. And he had



that car six months and he parked it in front of his office at Piasano Medical Plaza. And one morning early, the man at McDonald's called him on the phone and said, "Doctor, did you let somebody borrow your car?" And my husband Francisco said, "No." He says, "Well, I just saw a man drive off with it." And so Francisco went out, and sure enough the car was gone. And they said the man was in a leisure suit, blue leisure suit, light blue. And of course he called the police and told them immediately, but he didn't get too much action. And he never did find the car.

M: Could you tell me the date when this happened?

V: Well, it was in January of '78, January of '78 is when it was. The day I don't know. And he'd locked the car and everything. And those type of cars are very difficult to get in because it has a little button that's very small, that little lock button. It doesn't have a head on it that you could pull it up, so I don't know how they got in it, the men got in it. Anyway, and so he looked and looked for the car. And the police, the detectives helped him and everything, and he never did find it.

Well, he had a brother in Mexico City who's a lawyer, Licenciado Rosendo Veloz. And so some way they thought that they spotted it in Mexico City. And my husband went down to Mexico City, took a trip down there, stayed down there about four days, and they thought that the car like his was parked in the corralón there in Mexico City, but they couldn't get permission to go in there. Well, anyway it turned out, evidently

it probably was not his car. He didn't get any help at all. And he had talked with the American embassy to try to locate the stolen car because he felt it was in Mexico. And so the American embassy did what they could, but you know, they couldn't do too much since it was the government of Mexico. And my Brother-in-law, who is Congressman Richard White, he even called Oscar Flores, who is the attorney general of Mexico, he called him long distance from Washington, D.C., and he didn't get past the secretaries. He didn't get to even, they didn't even let him talk to Oscar Flores, 'cause you know, they had to tell what he wanted. And that was all, he didn't get past the secretaries. So my husband came home very dejected after spending a lot of money trying to find it. And so I just told him, I said, "You just better kiss that car good-bye." And the worst thing was, he didn't have any theft insurance on the car. That was the worst thing, you know. He had cancelled the theft insurance 'cause his insurance was high or something, so he didn't have any theft insurance on it. So that was just about like \$10,000 down the drain, you know. I guess that's why it hurt so bad for him. So I told him, "You just better forget that car." But it was just like an obsession for him trying to locate it and find it. You know, I really felt sorry for him, I felt bad about it, but I think I about convinced him that he wasn't gonna ever see that car again. And of course he got leads and some lawyer there said he thought he saw it in Saltillo and then he thought he saw it someplace else. You know, I think he tried every lawyer

and he had even offered \$2,000 reward for finding it. This lawyer who lived in Mexico, not Mexico City but I think he lived in Chihuahua or something, he thought he spotted it in Sinaloa or somewhere. And so he was looking, he had a lot of people looking for it, because of course they wanted that \$2,000 reward.

Well, this summer it was a very interesting thing, because this summer we were going down to the coast at Corpus Christi and Brownsville on a vacation, my son and my two little nephews from Piedras Negras and my husband and my cousin also from Eagle Pass. Well, the day before we were going down there, my cousins in Corpus said, "Don't come because the hurricane is coming, Hurricane Allen, and they're going to evacuate the city." So we were unable to go on that vacation, so we thought, "Well, we'll just go down to Piedras anyway." We had planned to go down to Piedras to pick up those nephews. So my husband stayed because he didn't want to miss that much of his practice, so he stayed here in El Paso. But my husband's first cousin and I drove down with our son and stayed down there with my husband's mother in Piedras. And we stayed down there, oh, ended up staying there about 10 days. We were trying to wait to see if the hurricane didn't hit or if it wasn't too bad, then we were gonna go on anyway and my husband would fly down there and meet us. But as it turned out it was flooded, Corpus was flooded, so we didn't go.

So the next to last day that we were in Eagle Pass, in Piedras (we were supposed to leave the next morning on Sunday,

it was Saturday morning), my sister-in-law, my husband's sister, is a doctor, doctora, in Piedras, and she works at the Seguro Social in Piedras. And she was going about seven o'clock to work one morning with her daughter. And so they were going down this main street on the way to the Seguro. And the daughter, named Mimi who's about 18, she said, "Look mama, that looks like Francisco's car parked in front of that Motel Miranda." And so the sister said, "Yes, it does." She says, "After you take me, go home and get L'Jon and let her come look at it." So she took the mother and then came home immediately, and /she/ got home about 7:15. And so the daughter, which is my niece, and I went back to this Motel Miranda and looked at the car. And so I looked at it and I recognized some special hubcaps my husband had on it, and I recognized some kind of a little decorative tape he put around the sides and in the back where that little wheel part is on the back of the Mark V's. And I looked at that and those two things kind of cued the fact that it was like his car. And then I saw the back, Jack Criswell, and that's the company he bought it in in Houston. And I thought it was, I wasn't sure, it looked familiar. Well, then we kind of snooped around the car, we were afraid to stay too long because, you know, it was real early in the morning, we didn't know if it was stolen somebody would come out and, you know, wanted to know what we were doing. So we went immediately back in the car and I went back home and I woke up my son

and asked him, I said, "Frank, what was the name of that company that Daddy bought his car from in Houston?" And Frank said, "Jack Criswell." I says, "I think I found daddy's car." You know, we were so excited but we weren't sure. So I called my husband on the phone immediately, long distance. And he had, he had the car number, he was just leaving to go to his office. And he says, "Okay, I've got the car number at the office, call me at the office." So we waited a little while, I called him at the office and he gave me the number of the car.

Okay, we went back to the motel with that number, and in the meantime, my sister-in-law, who is the doctora, she called the mayor, Mayor Humberto Acosta of Piedras. They are very good friends and she is the comadre with the mayor's wife, Blanca; they're good friends. And my sister-in-law actually worked for about six months in the police department seeing prostitutes and checking them out and so forth as a doctor. So she knew all the policemen and, you know, she knew the mayor and everybody in Piedras 'cause they've lived [there] all their lives. Well, the mayor immediately sent some policemen there, and by the time we got back, two motorcycle policemen had come. And so they looked around the car and so forth, and so with them, I went in with the policemen to ask at the desk whose car that was. And the girl at the desk said that it was Commandante Javier Alvarez. And I said, "Well, who is he?" He says, "Well, he is a federal policeman." And as it was, it turned

out that he was the chief of the federal police in the state of Coahuila. And when I heard that I said, "Oh, Lordy, we'll never get that car back if that's a federal policeman with it." Well, then the motorcycle police, they were kind of. . .I don't know, they looked like they were a little bit afraid at first. You know, they looked like they didn't want to get involved when they heard who was driving it.

So then we looked at the number of the car up on the windshield, you know, that's inside the front of the windshield, and it was the same number as my husband's. And I knew immediately that was his car. I was sure to begin with, but I wanted to verify it. So we went back home and we called my sister-in-law over at the hospital and said, "It's Francisco's car. The numbers match." So she told me, she said, "You take that number to the mayor's house." Well, we got in the car again and went to the mayor's house, and the poor mayor was still in his bathrobe, he'd just gotten out of bed. So the maid came down and we gave the number to the maid and the maid took it back up there. Well, immediately the mayor called the chief of police in Piedras, chief of police, and then we went back home and I called Francisco and told him it was his car for sure. And so he made reservations to fly down to San Antonio immediately. Then we went back to the motel where the car was. Bu that time the assistant chief of police, the subcomandante they call him, had arrived. And they had

parked a police wagon behind the car so nobody could back it out and move it. So then I gave that assistant policeman the number, and he already had the number that the mayor had called in and given him. And then he took my number and he looked at the mayor's number and he checked the car and sure enough it matched, so he was convinced that that was my car.

And all that time my two nephews and my son Frank and my niece were all in the car, and we were in two different cars going back and forth making all these trips. And the mother had told him, "Don't hang around because it's dangerous." 'Cause we told her the federal policemen had it. She says, "It's very dangerous so don't hang around in front." So we went across the street you know in the cars and sat in the car and watched because we wanted to sit close. In the meantime my son, one of the trips we had made home, back and forth home, he'd gotten his movie camera and he had it in the car and he filmed all the goings on from across the street, which was quite exciting when we finally developed 'em and saw. Well, we waited across the street. And then it wasn't too long that this Javier Alvarez, the federal policeman, came but he was not sleeping in that Motel Miranda, he was sleeping down the street in another motel called Cinuenta y Siete. And I think probably the reason that he was there in the beginning was because two days before that López Portillo had come to a little town called Nava to view this

thermo-electric plant there. And all of these federal policemen and the bodyguards and all these bola de gente had come with them, evidently, and I think that probably he was staying down in that other motel 'cause that's probably where all that group congregated.

But anyway, he came in a truck. And he went up. . . of course now we didn't hear all this 'cause we were across the street. But this policeman, Lieutenant Palomares, is the one that told my sister-in-law what went on later, you know. We couldn't hear him. Well, Javier Alvarez came up and he wanted his car and the local policeman wouldn't give it to him. He says, "We have orders of the mayor not to move this car." He says, "But I am the federal police, you must respect my authority." Well, this Palomares, the policeman, said, "Well, we are the local police and you must respect our authority because we've got orders from the mayor and we can't move this car." And so he took the man's keys, I don't know what else; you know, the conversation went on, that's all they told us. And he signed some kind of a paper, made him sign some paper and he took the keys. Well, then this federal policeman that was driving our car hopped in his truck; and incidently, it was a brand new truck about like a '79 truck, and it didn't have any license plates on it at all, which was probably a stolen truck. And our car didn't have any license plates either on it. And so he went away, sped away in this truck, talking on a CB radio.



M: This was the federal chief of police.

V: The federal chief of policeman in the state of Coahuila that was driving our car went away in this truck, a new truck, a '79 truck, without a license plates on it. Which means it was stolen also, because they're not supposed to have those new trucks or those new type of elegant cars in Mexico. There's a certain limit, they have a certain year of cars in Mexico, they have a certain make you can have, you know, and those new ones they can't have. And like a Lincoln Continental you can't have, and just certain makes they can have. I think they can have an LTD and certain ones like that. Okay.

Then about 15 minutes later he came back with four other men with him. And those other men were driving a Monte Carlo with a Texas license on it. It was a new, not brand new, but a new one, about maybe '78, I don't know. It had a Texas license on it and four of 'em came up, with him. And of course the conversation I guess the same thing, wanting to get the car and they wouldn't give it to him. Oh, and the policeman, and he really had nerve, this little policeman Palomares. He told my sister-in-law, he says that he told him, he says, "If you come one step closer," he told those five men, "You come one step closer, I'm gonna shoot." That's what he said he told them. And of course they had some other policemen around, but he was the main one that was standing in front of that car guarding it. You know, of course the police car was

behind it and he couldn't have backed it out if he wanted to. So the federal police wanted a pack of cigarettes that was in the car. Well, he wouldn't even let him go in there to get 'em, he got 'em himself, he got 'em and gave 'em to him. Then they all went away in the car. And later, I'm told, that this federal police called Mexico City trying to get some high-up official to help him get that car back, because the lawyer for the local police department in Piedras Negras told my husband that when he came, and told him that he was trying to get it back.

Well, okay, to make a long story short. . .

M: No, that's okay, no, give me all the details.

V: Okay, the details. Well, anyway, then after that, after they sped away, then a little bit later we went on, we went on back to the house. Then about 30 minutes later they took the car to the police station, the local police station in Piedras, and parked it in their, they call it corralón, which is like a big, you know, parking lot. And then the chief of police called home and asked for Doctora Veloz, my sister-in-law, which she wasn't there, she was working. So he talked to me. He says, "You need to come up to the police station immediately and fill out a claim for the car before the federal policemen does it." So we hopped in the car. And all these kids, went everywhere we went; these three boys and one girl, we all went everywhere. There was big excitement. You know, I mean it was like

something on TV, like a detective story on the television.

It was quite high drama.

M: Were these all your kids?

V: Well, one was my boy, he was seventeen. And my nephew is the doctora's, two of her sons, one is 13 and the other one's 15, and her daughter was the older one who's eighteen. So just one of my sons and three of the doctora's, my niece and nephews. So we went, and of course Piedras, the police station is right downtown in Piedras. And there was a big line, it was about 11 o'clock and that's when everybody goes to Eagle Pass during their lunch hour. I don't know why everybody goes to Eagle Pass. There was a huge line and we got stuck in this line. And I was so worried, I was afraid, "Well, that federal's gonna get there before we do, so we have to hurry." So what I did is, I told my son to drive the car, I was driving. I said, "Frank, drive the car. Jaime," my nephew, "and I are gonna get out, and we're gonna run to the police station." So we got out and let my son with the car and just ran, literally ran, about six blocks to the police station.

M: You ran from Eagle Pass?

V: No, no this is all in Piedras.

M: In Piedras. Where was the line?

V: The line was in Piedras going over across the bridge to Eagle Pass.

M: You had to go to Eagle Pass?

V: No, no, no. We had to go downtown, but they start lining up downtown and there's only one little tiny bridge and it's just a two way bridge.

M: Oh, I see, you were caught in that traffic but you were not on your way across the bridge.

V: We were caught in the traffic. No, we were not going to Eagle Pass, Texas, we were just caught in the traffic of everybody going over to Eagle Pass and we were trying to get downtown where the police station is, and the police station's a half a block from the bridge. See, that was our problem, we were caught in all this traffic a half a block from the bridge. So what we did is, we just let my son take the car and we just, you know, ran six blocks to the police station, and finally he showed up, you know, with the car a little bit later.

But when we got to the police station, oh, everything's so formal there you got to talk with the chief of police first, and then we went into another room and they had like a clerk typist. He may have been a lawyer, I don't know. But he typed the testimony like, you know, of when we had the car, when we lost it and so forth, and the description of the car and all of this business. And it ended up being about like five or six pages, you know, typing all of this. And of course I know some Spanish and some people helped me translate, you know, but he was just typing everything in Spanish. And about that time then my sister-in-law came in to the police

station from the Seguro hospital. And so she helped, added to it. And then he also had to type a witness or testimony, she was the witness that you know, she saw the car and it was her brother's car and so forth. So he typed about four more pages of her testimony. And then we had to sign that up and down, up and down on every page, had to sign our full name on that, that that was a legal document I guess. And all that time, it was quite colorful, all the time that we were in that little room, people kept coming in and out. And if you've ever been in Mexico, when they are taking care of one person, they don't just finish you and then take another customer, they stop and take two or three customers while they still have you there sitting at the desk. And so he'd stop and someone would come in and he'd see them and they they'd go away, then he'd finish with me a little bit more, and then someone else would come in. And these two prostitutes came in. They had sent a man after 'em because I think they had venereal disease or something, and two prostitutes came in while we were there. And another man they called joto which you know, homosexual, he came in. I don't, and I mean it was just like Grand Central Station! It was quite an interesting experience to see everybody coming in and out while they were trying to do our business. It took forever for 'em to finish all that typing. Well, finally after they saw about four other customers besides us, then they finished. And then they said that when my husband comes, then

to come down that night and then they would, you know, see if we could have the car the next morning, which was Sunday.

Okay, so then after we filled out all those papers and, you know, so forth, then we went back home. And you know, there wasn't anything to do much, that was in the afternoon, until my husband came. Well, he couldn't get a direct flight to Piedras or Eagle Pass even. He had to go to San Antonio, then he had to take a bus, so it was 9:30 that night before he ever got down here. And incidentally, one thing I want to tell you about that car, the car was in pretty good condition. A few little bumps here and there. They had put a CB radio in it sometime or another, and it had a little hole drilled in the trunk for the CB. And do you know it still had my husband's medical insignia on the back bumper. They hadn't even taken it off. This insignia was still there, on the back bumper. You know the medical, the snake with the staff and everything. And this comandante, Javier Alvarez, had told the policeman that he'd only had that car two months and that he had gotten it in Monterrey. So I don't know if that was true or you know, it's possible that these federal policemen pass it from one to the other and maybe another one had had it or maybe someone had had it and he had taken it off of 'em because they weren't supposed to have that type of a car in Mexico, I don't know. But he said he'd only had it two months. So whether that was true there was no way of checking, you know, that at all.

But anyway, that night my husband came and we picked him up at 9:30 at the bus station. Well, he went immediately to the police station, the corralón, and he saw the car, and of course he was convinced it was his. Well, he wasn't too happy about the idea of bringing it the next morning because he didn't want it to stay there overnight because he was afraid, knowing. . .he is from Mexico, you know, and of course he's a U.S. citizen now. But he was afraid that the federal police would try to get it back or pay somebody, you know, mordida, or a big sum of money to go in there and take it during the night, you know, 'cause only one person was in there watching it and of course that's a possibility. And also since he talked to the lawyer there, the lawyer for the police department told him that that federal police had tried to get help from Mexico City to get it back. So he wanted to move it that night. Well, he had to get permission from the mayor. Well, there was a big feria which is a big, you know, fair, in Piedras, and the mayor was out at the fair. We all had to hop in these two, three different cars and went out to the fair and talked to the mayor. My husband brought the title of the car and the keys and also a copy of the police report saying the car had been stolen and all the circumstances concerning that. Well, the mayor said, "You need to get a xerox copy of the title and everything," 'cause they needed two or three copies. So everything was closed, we couldn't xerox anything, so my husband remembered

an old girl friend that he had who never, incidentally, never married, and she owns a store, she runs her father's store, and they have a xerox copier in there. So we went over to Licha Montemayor's house and she was just about ready to go to bed, and we got her and she graciously went to the store and made the xerox copies at her store. And then we went back out to the feria. And at that time, you know, they had all these dignataries and they were eating supper and by that time it was about eleven, eleven-thirty, by the time we did all that. And so we all ate supper with the mayor and all the dignataries while we were out there. So finally the mayor signed the paper and gave his permission. And then my husband made different other stops, I'm not sure, because we ended up just seeing some of the feria at the time because a friend was visiting, we wanted to show her the feria.

Well, by the time we got all of this done, it was about like three o'clock, by the time we finished all of these papers and so forth and getting everybody to sign, the chief of police and everybody was supposed to sign. Well, we went back down to the local police station in Piedras, and the chief of police was there and oh, he was very, very gracious, he was a very interesting man. He had served in World War II in the U.S. And I guess he was there on a resident passport probably. And he speaks English. And a very distinguished man. Well, anyway, he signed the official release of the car. And of course they had to play safe, because it was a real touchy



problem for them. Because here they were the local taking the car away from the federals. And usually in any case the federals always win. The mayor was real smart, Beto Acosta. He's a good friend of the governor of the state of Coahuila. He called the governor when he had this problem on his hands, and asked the governor what he should do. You know, he said he wanted to give it back but he wanted to okay it with the governor, I guess so he'd have somebody standing up for him in case the federals got after him or, you know, made trouble. So the governor told him to go on and give the car back. And we found out this later from my sister-in-law, we didn't know it at the time. And so, anyway, the chief of police, he was convinced that it was my husband's car 'cause my husband had the title and everything, and the number matched. But the lawyer that was there, he wanted to be protected, and he says, "Doctor, see if your keys fit that car." So my husband had the key and he opened the car with his keys. And he says, "Okay, I'm convinced. We're covered in case there's any trouble." And I think that's probably what he meant, you know, that there was no doubt it was his car in case anybody said something about it.

So in the meantime the chief of police gave my husband this huge, beautiful book with pictures and everything of the history of the military service in Mexico. It was all in Spanish. And of course I guess that they were you know. . . we weren't of course pressing any charges against the federal

policeman who had it, we had no authority to do that. But I guess it was like a gift. Of course my husband knew him because he grew up in that town. But we thanked him and shook everybody's hands, and, you know, very happy and so forth.

Anyway, we all got in the car, my husband and I got in the car. And it was about 3:30 at that time. And in the meantime that afternoon I had been worried about what to do without a license plate, what to do when we got to the border and we didn't have a license plate and the people at the border would say, "Well, what happened to your license plate?" And if they would try to run that number of the car in the machine it would bounce out as a stolen car in the computer. And so I called the detective at the police force in Eagle Pass, Texas, to talk with him to investigate what we should do. And he gave us some valuable information, he said, "Well, when you get to the border, whenever you cross the car, tell them that you have talked to me," you know, and I took his name down and everything, and I talked to another policeman and so forth. And he said, "Tell them if there's any trouble to call us." And he advised us that we would have to wait until Monday to get the license plate, a temporary license plate which was good I think for two, three days or something like this to drive from Eagle Pass to El Paso. So I remember when we crossed the border, and it was 3:30 at night, well, the men didn't ask us for the

title or anything. I just told them a little bit what had happened and that this was, you know, why we didn't have a license plate and gave him the man's name, but he didn't call him. I guess he believed me and didn't call. And so I asked him at the time, I said, "We would like if you could to have your dog sniff out the car, because we don't know if the people had been carrying drugs or marijuana or what in the car." And he told me, he said, "Well, our dog isn't here now, but if you'll come in the morning then we'll have them do that."

So we didn't have any trouble at all passing, you know, bringing the car back. They were very nice at the border, the American side. And of course my husband sighed a relief once we passed, you know, got there, because he knew that we wouldn't have any more trouble, you know, from the people in Mexico. And we parked the car in my. . . we have an aunt that lives in Eagle Pass, and we parked the car in her garage and parked another car behind it so nobody would come and get it out, you know. We were still worried. (Laughter) And so, anyway, the next morning early, my husband went on and drove the car that we had driven down there and he had to get back to his office on Monday, so he went on back and I stayed down there. So early the next morning we went over to Eagle Pass and got the car and took it to the police station and they had this dog jump in the trunk and inside and sniffed it out and everything, and the policeman said that dog's never been

wrong in any cases. Every case he's been correct, so he said nothing was wrong with it and didn't have drugs or anything. So we left it that night and then the next morning early on Monday I went over to the car license and gave the title to the car and they gave a temporary license plate. And I had a mechanic check it out, and you know, the car was ready to go. It was in pretty good condition. It had to have a light fixed, a tail light and a flicker light, you know, something like that. And we had to buy a jack in case we had a. . . 'cause the jack wasn't in there. And so it was ready to go. And so my son and my two nephews, one that's 13 and one that's 15, and I drove the car back to El Paso. And you know, we were still worried, you know, that something would happen. Maybe the people in Mexico would follow us to get it back. But once we were over on the American side we didn't feel. . . you know, we felt pretty safe. And we drove it back to El Paso.

And then what was interesting was is when we got it back my husband felt. . . and he was very keen, he felt very keenly that it's a racket--you know, of the people stealing cars and the federal policemen driving it. And I told him it sounds like it's a fringe benefit of the federal police. You know, like a company car is provided for you. Well, the federal government just turns their back and let's them drive these stolen cars as a fringe benefit of the job since they are. . . A lawyer told him that the local policeman have in Mexico,

they have a budget for cars, but the federal policemen do not. And now this is what someone told him, and so maybe this is the possibility that they just let them drive the stolen cars as part of their job.

M: They don't have a budget for personal cars?

V: For the federal policemen.

M: For personal cars?

V: I don't know, I assumed it was for police cars for [ ] police-related work [ ]. They had to drive their own personal car, this is what I understood, I guess like the FBI and this type of thing. Of course he's like the FBI. The department he works in is like, the man who had our car, works like being the chief of the FBI in the state of Texas, was kind of that position. I mean you might check further on that. But evidently, you know, the federal policemen that do FBI work, and I guess body guards and things of this sort, have to evidently use their own car. They're not provided in the budget for a car.

So anyway, my husband felt that this story should be told because you know he. . . it really kind of, you know, aggravating the fact that he had worked and bought this car and then it was stolen like this. And millions cars have been stolen in El Paso, not just his. So many are stolen every day and every year. And you can't get any cooperation from the local governments to get it back, and it was a miracle. If we had that car in Juarez we would not have had a chance to get it back.

M: Why do you say that?

V: I don't think we would have a chance. The reason is, I'll tell you. Well, let me finish telling you this and I'll tell you why in a minute. My husband called the reporter for the Times and told him on the phone about the story because he felt it should be told and people should hear about it, you know. And so the reporter came out and took the picture and, you know, gave me an interview, and then it came out in the El Paso Times and also in the Herald-Post. And incidentally [it] also came out in two different papers in Piedras. But the paper in Piedras made the chief of police look like he was returning the stolen car to the border, that's the thing. It made him look good, like he was really returning it to the border. Like he was, he ended up a hero you know. And of course everybody knew, but the El Paso paper printed the truth, you know, like it was really, you know, they printed the truth. Because we had his seal. I forgot to mention, in the car, the visor of the car that was stolen had the seal of the federal police on the visor. And the El Paso reporter came out and took that picture of the seal, the federal policeman's seal on our car. Of course, if he was returning it to the border he wouldn't have stuck his seal up there, you know. He had been driving it around having a good time.

Anyway, the reporter told me, now this is what he told me. I told him, I says, "I don't think we would have had a

chance in Juarez." He says, "You wouldn't have. You wouldn't have gotten it back." He says, "Because several months ago the local policemen in El Paso were trying to get some cars back from Juarez that had been stolen and they knew they were over there. The local policemen were trying to cooperate with them. The federal police in Mexico got wind of it and sent a bunch of federal policemen over there. And they surrounded the chief of police of Juarez, they surrounded his house. And the chief of police called some deputies to come in and help help him. And when the deputies got there, the chief of policemen were waiting for them and made them get on the floor of the car to the barrel of a gun and wouldn't let 'em go in." This is what he said. Now where he got this information, I don't know. He said that they put that chief of police, the local policemen chief, in jail, and it made it look like he was involved with the car theft when really it was the federal police. And this reporter told me that they had a big corralón over there in Juarez that the federal policemen had put stolen cars in, and that the local policemen were trying to get in there, and that they got in this big truck and rammed the gate and that the federal policemen were in there waiting for them with machine guns. And it came out, all it came out in the paper, but by the time you read what happened in the paper the federal policemen looked as if they had come to see about this local policemen that were doing all of this and it made them look good. So in every instance, the paper, the

federals always look good, "los federales," they look really good, when they're the ones that are in the ring, the main ring. Because you know you've got to have permission to pass these cars over. After certain kilometers you can't take 'em in.

And so anyway this is what the reporter told me, and he said that probably that was true, probably we would not have had a chance. Because the only reason we got it back was because we knew the mayor personally. And the mayor's a very good, very honest man, he's done a lot of help in Piedras Negras, a lot of, you know, cleaning up and so forth; and the fact that a smaller town probably has a tendency to be more honest than a bigger city, and Piedras is a smaller town. But this is what the reporter told me. So anyway it came out in the paper, and of course everybody was so excited; everybody that knew my husband had lost his car, they just. . .he got phone calls, and all of his patients told him and even some of 'em came over to look at the car. And all of my teachers were so excited when they heard about it. Because they said, "Weren't you afraid over there?" I said, "We were so busy we didn't have time to be afraid, you know. We weren't afraid at all, things were happening so fast." And then the El Paso paper made the local policemen in Piedras look like heroes. Which they were heroes. [Pause]

Anyway, when we got back, I wrote a letter to the mayor of Piedras and the chief of police, the assistant chief of



police, and the Lieutenant Palomares, the one that was so brave that stood there and wouldn't let them have the car, thanking them for their help and how much we appreciated it and everything. [I] also got my brother-in-law, Congressman Richard White, to write a letter also to them. And they were very impressed, you know, when they got especially the letter from him, too, commending them on their honesty and their help when we couldn't have gotten anybody else to help us. Nobody else could've helped us. As I said, that was just a unique circumstances, just a miracle that we saw the car anywhere. It was just a miracle that we found it there in my husband's hometown when I was visiting his mother. And I happened to be there at the same time. And it was just a bunch of coincidences that happened. Like we couldn't go on our vacation to Corpus and we had to stay there. Then López Portillo, the president of Mexico, was there and all these policemen were there. And it was just a series of coincidences. I wouldn't have believed it if anybody'd ever told me I would find that car again. I never would've believed it. It was just un milagro.

But anyway, we were a little worried and afraid that maybe the mayor would get into difficulty, in any kind of a difficulty, but when we found out that he had talked to the governor and so forth, then they said, "Don't worry." But he wanted to see the copy from the El Paso paper, because it not

only went in the El Paso paper, the true story, not the covered up story like in Mexico, but it appeared in the Juarez paper, too. And it really indicated the fact that the federal policeman was the one that was driving the car and had stolen it. I mean, they didn't say he had stolen it, but gave the impression that he was not returning it, you know, that he really had it and he was driving it around. And a friend of my husband's said that this news got all the way down to Mexico City and it appeared in one of the papers down there. So it appeared in about eight different papers, I think, the story about it.

And one thing I told the reporter of the El Paso paper which he printed, and I'm glad he did it 'cause I asked him if he would, this experience about the officials and the mayor and the policemen in Piedras has restored my faith in the government of small towns in Mexico. Because we always hear how corrupt they are and this and that and you gotta pay a "mordida." And we didn't have to pay one penny. My husband even offered, he was gonna give a reward, you know, to the policemen, or give the policemen some money, and the mayor would not let him. The mayor said, "If you want to give money, give it to the general police fund, and it will be divided among the policemen." And this is what my husband did. And as I said, to me this restored my faith in the local governments of Mexico, because we know that there are some honest ones. Although we have a stereotype feeling that they all are

not honest, which is wrong. But this place, the local policemen in Piedras, you couldn't have found any more honest. And of course, as I said, we knew them, and that was one thing. If we had been strangers, whether we'd have gotten that help, that's another matter. But in this instance, particularly, we really got help from them and it was the mayor's responsibility. And he took the big decision and the responsibility to return it and to go against the federal government.

And one other thing, I wondered, and my husband thinks this, too. He thinks it's not only just the federal, he thinks it's higher up than the federal policemen--that Oscar Flores, the attorney general, must be involved in some way also, because he knows they can't overlook things like this. And when we were on our vacation in Mazatlán we were talking to a Mexican who is Jewish. He's a Mexican citizen, lives in Guadalajara. [We told him that] we thought it was just American cars being stolen. He said, "No. It's the Mexican cars are being stolen in Guadalajara, too." He said he'd had four cars stolen within a period of two years. Now how he got permission to get new cars, elegant cars, I don't know that. But he must've paid somebody in order to drive these cars. He said that his family there at Guadalajara, out of all of his family--his sisters and brothers, mother and father, and aunts and uncles--in one year they had had eight cars stolen out of their immediate family. And he said that

they were taking them, shipping them to South America and selling 'em. So as I said, it's a racket, and one person can't fight, you can't fight the government, you know. And the reporter in El Paso told me also that a delegation went to Washington, D.C. to talk about this problem, and I think tried talking with the Mexican officials and so forth. So I don't see how the problem could ever be alleviated about so many cars stolen and taking 'em over to Mexico. I don't see how unless. . .even if two governments get together, someone's still gonna give permission because they make money illegally on it. But this just happened to be a unique circumstance where we got our car back. And all I can say, it's a miracle.

M: Well, what an adventure you had. (Laughter) Is there anything that you'd like to add?

V: Well, I'd like to add one thing. My husband now has insurance on it. (Laughter) That's the first thing he did, he called his insurance man from Piedras Negras saying, "Write up an insurance policy," before we even drove it back. So now it's insured. And of course if it's stolen again, it's insured. And there's a possibility it could be stolen again.

M: There's always a possibility.

V: But he was glad to get it back and I was happy for him to get it back because, as I said, he had such a love for that car and it almost seemed like a godsend that he got it back.

M: Well, that's a fantastic story. Thank you.