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Interview no. 717

José I. Oaxaca

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: JOSE I. OAXACA
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 3, 1985
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Student at UTEP, 1982-1986.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Brief biographical data, recollections of his experiences as an engineering student in the 1980's, his scholarships, St. Pat's Day.

Length of interview: 25 minutes Length of transcript: 18 pages

Jose I. Oaxaca
August 3, 1985
By Rebecca Craver
History of the University Project

C: Let's start out now with some biographical data and tell me, were you born in El Paso?

O: No I was born in Juarez, Mexico on May 23, 1963. And we moved to El Paso when I was 11 years.

C: I see. And what made your family move to El Paso?

O: Well, my parents got divorced when I was six years old and my mother, I guess she wanted a better life for us. So, she sold the house we had over there and she used all the money so we could move over here.

C: I see. Did she get a job right away as soon as you moved?

O: Yeah, she did, yeah. Right, like in the week before we moved. Her first job was at, I think it was Kressler, the furniture [company] or something like that. That was her first job right there.

C: Okay. And you had brothers and sisters that came with you?

O: I have two brothers and one sister.

C: And where were you in the family?

O: I'm the youngest. I have two older brothers and an older sister.

C: I see. And where did you settle in El Paso?

O: Okay. I guess the first two years we lived with my grandmother. She lives here in El Paso. It was Ysleta. We lived there for about two years, and then we moved close there

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but to an apartment for about another year, and then we moved to another apartment the next year, and then we moved to the Second Ward and I've been living there for the last, I guess, eight or nine years.

C: So you live in the Second Ward?

O: That's right.

C: What high school did you go to?

O: I went to Bowie High School.

C: Did you work while you were in high school?

C: I started working when I was a freshman. I took a job as a.... It was hard. Construction worker. I was a freshman but I didn't want to be just home and do nothing so I worked there for about two months. Then when I was a sophomore, I was a member of the Boys' Club and we had a campaign, Boy of the Year Campaign, and I was running for Boy of the Year so they offered me a job at Sun Drugs. So I worked there my sophomore year.

C: So the Boys' Club helped you get a job at Sun Drug.

O: That's right, that's right. And I worked there for, I guess, three years. In summer I would work something like five or six hours a day and then during school I would work on Saturdays like eight, nine hours and then when I started attending UTEP I took a Work-Study job. When I was a sophomore, the Special Academic Services, I helped with orientation with provisional students. I lasted there one year and then I moved to the Scholarship Office for one year and [now] I'm working at _____ Electric, a subdivision of General Motors. I'm doing some kind of student training for engineering.

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C: How did you get that job?

O: I interviewed. You see, I had an interview for a job with a company. I wasn't a U.S. citizen and I had heard (I don't know if it was true) that they give you a lot of hassle because of taxes and insurance and all that. So I became a U.S. citizen this January. The 18th. Right after that, I started interviewing. And I got a job with _____ Electric here in Juarez. So they had a plant in Juarez but I got a job here.

C: So you've been a Mexican citizen until '85.

O: That's right. I was a resident, a U.S. resident, but I became a U.S. citizen in January.

C: Well, congratulations.

O: Thank you.

C: Well, what made you decide to attend UTEP? What were the forces that worked on you?

O: Okay, this is interesting. When I was in high school I wanted to go to MIT. I had two girlfriends. One of them went to MIT and the other went to Columbia University in New York.

C: These are friends from your high school?

O: Yeah, from Bowie, uh huh. All of the top students, they get to go out of town. So I wanted to go to MIT or Columbia and I started applying and everything and then I applied to UTEP also. And then I got a scholarship here, a Presidential Scholarship. It was \$1500 per year and also at MIT I got a good financial aid package but I would have to borrow about \$3000 every semester.

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C: Every semester!?

O: Yeah, every semester. Loans, and then work, and then since I'm the youngest (all my brothers and my sister are married) I would have just my mother alone and I didn't know if I wanted to do that. So, I mean, after I got the scholarship I said I'm going to stay here. I mean, because it pays for everything and I get to keep some money for myself and so that did it .

C: That's great. So you're living at home?

O: Yeah, I'm at home.

C: What other members of your family went to college?

O: None. And none of them graduated from high school. They're pretty bright but they never liked school. My brother's in the Navy, the oldest. He went in Juarez to a secundario, which is something like high school. He was learning to be a bank teller and he needed one more semester to graduate and he dropped out. And then we moved here, and he went to Ysleta High School and to Jefferson and he was a junior, and then he dropped out and went to the Navy. He never liked school. He's real bright but I don't know, he's never had the discipline to....

C: Well, has he encouraged you to go to college or...?

O: Well, what made me decide to go to college? I don't know. Like when I was younger, I always went to school because I had to. I mean I had to go to school so I just, I would go to school. I was over there [in Juarez] in the third grade, so [when] we moved here I [should have been] in the fourth the next year. They wanted to put me in the third grade because I

didn't know any English, and I told them, "You put me in the third grade, I'm not going to go to school. I mean why should you put me in the third grade?" And the first day of classes, they had a math contest at my classroom. They had a math contest. It was real funny. They would have two lines and then two people and then they would give us a problem and whoever finished the first got a candy, a piece of candy. I was coming from Juarez and I mean I was in the third grade over there [when] I [learned] division and a little bit of fractions. When I was here [in the fourth grade] they would do multiplication. So they gave me a multiplication problem. I finished right away and the poor guy I got next to me, he took about five minutes to finish. After that, I started liking it. And then when I moved over here to Second Ward at Hart School, and at that school you go at your own pace. You don't go with the rest of the class. They'll give you a test and if you're advanced they'll give you advanced work. So in my math I finished everything they could give me there. And so they were giving me decimals. I started working with decimals. It was in the fifth grade and then I started liking getting good grades. So I would get As and Bs, "that's good, that's good."

C: So you like making good grades?

O: Yeah, people would notice me more and say, "That's good, that's good." Then one time in math I had never gotten a B in math, never in high school. And I was going to get a B. It was something like two days before the six weeks were over and I was going to get a B so I said, "No, I can't get a B." So I

hurried up and did some more homework and all that and I got the A. And after that, I didn't like Bs anymore so I started just going for A, going to get an A. And then when I started going to junior high and high school I noticed how things were, a little bit more, at home and I noticed that I don't want to be like this all my life, like, live in the Second Ward all my life and do nothing. So I started liking school more and then, because I liked to get As, I started learning more and the more I learned the more I said, "Hey, maybe I don't know anything." So I said, "No, I just like school a lot." I don't know, I want to be world famous, hopefully, sometime. I don't know if I will.

C: Well, you've always liked math and science, then?

O: I don't know if I liked it. It was natural for me. When I was something like six years old, [when] I wasn't even in school yet, my brothers would get me and they would put, over there in Juarez, on the wall they would write something like "one plus one" and "one plus one is this." I don't know. So they would teach me and then when I was six years old my sister was in the first grade and she didn't like school. She would always cry so I would go with her [and] stay with her so she wouldn't cry. But I ended up doing the work and she ended up crying still. (Laughter) It was funny and I don't know. I guess I was like that. I don't know why.

C: What made you decide to major in engineering?

O: Numbers. Yeah, I mean, those are the easiest, the easiest things for me.

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C: Were you in any of the summer programs for engineers?

O: Yes. It was here at UTEP. It was a Summer Engineering Institute.

C: And you were a freshman in high school.

O: In high school, yeah.

C: How did you hear about that program?

O: You see, they advertised it in the high schools, but one of the prerequisites was that you had to be a U.S. citizen, again. (Those were my problems so I became a U. S. citizen.) And I wasn't, so I told the teacher. They were asking, "Are you going to join?" I said, "No, I'm not a U.S. citizen. I can't." I don't know. They talked to somebody and they let me. So I came for something like six weeks during the summer.

C: Who taught it. Do you remember?

O: It was the, the coordinator was Dr. Herrera, I think.

C: Yes, Juan Herrera.

O: And Dr. Stafford would help.

C: And what sort of things did you do?

O: Oh, they introduced us to all kinds of engineering--mechanical, industrial, electrical, metallurgical. They would give us exams and little projects that we could do. And we worked with computers and I like computers. I started working with computers and that's how I started.

C: What branch of engineering are you in?

O: In electrical. And I'm thinking, uh, I have two more semesters to graduate and it's not that easy. I kept going [saying], "Maybe I could be something else and do it easier."

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But that's why I'm in electrical because it challenges me the most. And I like computers a lot and I relate quite well to them. I mean, I get a computer and I'll learn it right away. That's why I didn't go into computers. It was too easy. I'd like to go into electrical. It's more exciting. It's the hardest, that's what I heard. I don't know. I don't like to be just normal.

C: Tell me, how did you hear that you received the Presidential Scholarship?

O: Okay, like I told you, I had applied to all these colleges like MIT and Columbia and then I applied to UTEP. And at the Boys' Club there's a counselor and the director. They will encourage me the whole time and the counselor, his name is Richard Flores. He graduated from here and he's getting his Master's right now in Education. So he would tell me, "Just go to UTEP. Don't go out of town. It's a cultural shock and you're going to be alone and it's a lot of money and just go to UTEP and then after that you can go to graduate school out of town." He will tell me that and then he will tell me, "Just apply for a scholarship. You'll get it." So he told me, "I don't know if you'll get the Presidential, but you'll get some money. But I know the way I am. I have to get the Presidential. I mean, if I get something else I'm not going to be happy. That's the way I am.

C: You want the top, don't you?

O: That's right. But I'm getting humble here at college. It's humbling me a lot. So, I don't know. I just put a lot of time

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into my application. I typed everything.

C: Did he help you, Mr. Flores, help you with that?

O: Oh, he helped me morally. But he would help me also with my work but I never pay attention to him. He has an idea that he will tell me. Like, I had a hard time with my English so I would ask him for help. And then he will tell me, "Okay, do it this way and write it," and he made me correct it. I never liked his method. I mean he was good but the way I am, I said, "No." [But] I was going, "Sure, sure." When he left, I would do exactly the way I wanted to. I would forget everything he told me and do it the way I wanted to. So, he did help me a lot. But with the application he never did. He helped me when I was something like freshman or sophomore and junior [in high school] a little bit. But when I turned to a junior, he got a teaching job at Andress High School so we couldn't see each other that much anymore. And he wouldn't help me that much, just morally, I guess. Since I never had my father, he was there all the time.

C: That's nice. Okay, so you sent the applications in?

O: Yeah. I took it personally. I didn't send it by mail. [I thought] maybe it won't get there. So I came over here and I talked to Martha Garcia. She was a scholarship officer and I gave it to her personally. "Here's my application." And since I was in a lot of math contests, I knew the University pretty good, so I gave it to her. And she told me, "Okay, that's good. You have everything here, so we'll let you know." So then I got a letter saying that I got the Stevens

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Scholarship, which is the next one, but [it] said, "You're still being considered for the Presidential. So I accepted the Stevens, just in case.

C: How much was that for?

O: \$1,000 per [year]. And then, I guess it was like on March something, I was going to go to a tennis tournament in Deming. I was on the tennis team, but they were gonna' leave, and they come into the office and they told me, "Jose, Jose, you got a Presidential Scholarship." I did, I did? I was so surprised. We were invited to a press conference and all this.

C: Did your mama come with you?

O: Yeah, she did.

C: I bet she was pleased. Proud.

O: Yeah, she was proud, yes. And my photo came out in the newspaper and everything. I was surprised.

C: So what year was that when you graduated from high school?

O: '82. In May of 1982.

C: And you're going to graduate from UTEP then next May?

O: Yeah. Just four years.

C: Wow. And you worked the whole time?

O: Yeah. I worked all the time.

C: How many hours have you worked while you've been in school?
40- hour weeks?

O: No, no, not so much. As a freshman I just worked like in Sun Drugs, something like a Saturday and then sometimes during the week...very little. Then as a sophomore I worked in Special Academic Services 10 hours a week. They wanted me to work 15

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but I told them, "Take it or leave it," because I can't work anymore [than that].

C: So you carried over 16 hours a semester here.

O: Yeah, I had to. I mean, [for maintaining] my scholarship, I had to carry 30 hours per [year]. My GPA is pretty high. My first year lost the Presidential and they took me down to the Stevens.

C: Oh did they.

O: They wanted a 3.5 and I couldn't make a 3.5 so I lost the Presidential and I went on to the Stevens.

C: So what's your GPA now?

O: 3.09.

C: Wow.

O: But these last two semesters have hurt me a lot. I had a 3.4 two semesters ago. So it's been going down.

C: What do you plan to do when you graduate?

O: I don't know. I don't know. I'm scared. I'm thinking about graduate school, work, and my girlfriend wants to get married but I don't know about that. I'm still thinking about it. You see, I want to go to graduate school. I know I am, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to do it right after graduation. I want to get out of the Second Ward. I want to live someplace else and I want to take my mother out of there also. So I'm going to have to work to do that. But if it was up to me, I would go to graduate school. But it's not up to me, so I guess I'll have to work some and then maybe go to college the nights, the graduate school.

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C: Would you want to live outside of El Paso when you get a job, take your mother and move far away, or...?

O: It all depends how much they will offer me here, where I'm working right now. I guess if I get pretty good [salary offers] I'll stay here. But if not, I'll go out-of-town. I've never been out of town so I guess it's something new.

C: How would your mother feel about that?

O: I don't know. Like, like she tells me, she tells me that if I get married she doesn't know if she wants to go with me. If I don't get married, she'll go with me, but if I do, I guess she'll move in with my sister. I don't know.

C: Are you a member of any campus organizations?

O: Yeah.

C: Which ones?

O: I'm a member of the Mexican-American Engineering Society, and Eta Kappa Nu which is the electrical engineering honor society, and I just got accepted to Mortar Board.

C: Oh, congratulations.

O: That's about it.

C: Great. So, what do you do in those organizations that you really like?

O: Okay. In the Mexican American Engineering Society, we go to the high schools, like Bowie and Jeff and Ysleta, where there's more Mexican Americans that might not be motivated to go to college and we talk to them. It's called the PACE program, which is Promotion and Awareness of Careers in Engineering. So we talk to them about engineering. I mean like, I went to

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Bowie and I talked about myself, about how I was when I was there and everything. And we just try to get students interested in college that might not be interested in college because maybe they think it's too hard. In Eta Kappa Nu I just got accepted last April, so I haven't been that active yet. And in Mortar Board, I don't know yet, either. I know that we help the community a lot in Mortar Board, but I don't know what kind of projects.

C: Well, I think that's wonderful that you're helping. Have you gone through the St. Pat's Day initiation?

O: Yeah. When I was a freshman. I liked it.

C: Tell me about it.

O: It's embarrassing but I liked it. I heard about it here. I mean all the students try to recruit you so they can paint you green.

C: Paint you green?

O: That's what they do. So, I said, "I'm not going to go through [it] by myself, so there was about six of us and we got together and said if we do it all together it won't be that bad. So you have to get here at 8 in the morning and they'll paint your face with lipstick, crayons and markers. They'll paint your shirt and your pants, but they tell you to bring something that you can throw away after you finish. So you have to have a change of clothes in your car. The only thing I didn't like is they gave you chewing tobacco. I hated it. I almost threw up. (Laughter) You had to have chewing tobacco with you all the time. That's the only bad thing about it and

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then we started in the Union Building and we'd go all around campus singing two songs.

C: Which songs?

O: One of them is a Mickey Mouse Song, "Who's the leader of the band? M-i-c-k-e-y M-o-u-s-e." And the symbol of that is: to engineers, all the other classes are Mickey Mouse courses. So we just go and sing, like in the Liberal Arts Building and the Business Building and the Science Building. So we'd go sing around campus. Then the other one is the Engineering Song and this is a song that puts the Aggies down. I don't remember it quite well right now but that's what it does.

C: What were some of the words?

O: Something like, "If I ever had a son, when he grows I will tell him to be a Miner not an Aggie." And "The Aggies football coach cannot even coach girls," something like that. I wish I had a copy but I don't. It's real funny. And then you go over there. Okay, we were all around campus and then we leave campus. Over on Sun Bowl Drive, behind the Fine Arts Building, they have a cave there which they call the Miner Cave and according to them, you stay there and you, I guess pay respects to it by being silent three minutes or something like that. But the good thing is that all professors are there also and then some of them have to get initiated also. And then they take us over there to the back of that company that sells cars, by the University Theaters.

C: Oh, by Rudolph Chevrolet.

O: Rudolph Chevrolet, that one.

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C: Okay.

O: On the back on some hills they'll blindfold you and then put you in a circle sitting down and then you know what happens? Well, they pour everything on top of you! I mean eggs, food that it's been there for days,.... Uh, honey, flour, everything, you name it. Yeah, just pour it on top of you everywhere. And you're blindfolded so you can't see what's going on. Then after that, they'll get little groups, about four or five, and they'll get you by hand. You make like a little chain and as they get to the hills, they'll take you walking around on the hills and they'll tell you there's a bridge there. You have to crawl on your hands to go [across it.] They put a stick....

C: It's not really a bridge?

O: No, it's not really a bridge and then they tell you, "You're a pig, go like a pig," so you have to. And "you're a dog, go like a dog." And after that they'll take you to the holy stone, so they call it. And they'll paint you green there. They'll just pour a bucket of green paint on top of your head and you have to kiss a cold stone. On your way there, they'll give you something. It's a gift to St. Patrick's, which is the leader. When you get there, you have to give him the gift. It's something scientific. When I was there I gave him the atomic _____ . And it had the laws of Newton and all this.

C: Oh.

O: And after that, you're finished.

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C: So who was St. Pat?

O: All the departments, they alternate. One year one of the metallurgical will be St. Pat and then the next year [another department].

C: Are they all engineers or do they let some geologists do it?

O: They let some science, but it's very rare for science to do it. They think we're crazy but the good thing is that the following year you get to do it. You [go through the initiation] once, but you get to do it three times. I've done it once, I did it when I was a sophomore. When I was a junior I had a test and I couldn't do it. The professor wouldn't let us skip class so I didn't do it this year but I plan to do it next year.

C: That sounds fun.

O: Yeah and this is like the Friday before St. Patrick's Day, before spring break, the Friday is when we do it.

C: Do you think there's value in traditions like that?

O: I think so. It's fun. I mean it's part of college life. It's supposed to be fun, not just studying. And man, it kinda gets engineers together. I mean nobody likes us, right? They said that we think we're it and all that.

C: Well, after all, the school began as an engineering school.

O: That's right. If it wasn't for the Engineering Building, we wouldn't be here.

C: Right. I guess that's really all the questions I have unless you want to add anything.

O: Not really.

C: Well, you have had a fascinating life.

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O: Exciting. Yeah, it's quite exciting.

C: And you're going to go far.

O: I hope so.

- PAUSE -

C: Okay, now you were saying.

O: Yeah, in the fourth grade I had a ESL class. It was English as a Second Language, something like that. When I came here, I placed out of the first English class, 3110, with my SAT score. On 3111 I got a B, and 3112 I got an A.

C: Wow.

O: And only in English and Psychology and History I have three Bs in classes that are not Engineering. All the other ones are As. [Only in] my engineering classes is where I have my Bs and my Cs.

C: Oh really?

O: So everything, I don't know, they're real easy, just memorizing, like History, Psychology and Political Science. My pronunciation is the one that can get better but I guess with time it will get better.

C: You obviously don't have any trouble with the written English at all.

O: No, no. I mean, right now I'm very proud of this. I have a record. I have turned in something like ten reports since the freshman [year].

C: Engineering reports?

O: Everything. Engineering, Psychology, History. I have never gotten a B. So that's about ten papers. I have a record.

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C: That is wonderful.

O: That's good.

C: It sure is.

END OF INTERVIEW WITH JOSE OAXACA