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## Interview no. 768

Colbert Coldwell

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Colbert Coldwell

INTERVIEWER: Ruth Graham

PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 2, 4, 1986

TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 768

TRANSCRIPT NO.: 768

TRANSCRIBER: Rebecca Craver

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Member of El Paso pioneer family, attorney, and county judge

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recollections of Coldwell and Eubank families, who settled in the El Paso area before the arrival of the railroads and farmed in the Lower Valley.

Length of Interview: 40 minutes Length of Transcript 12 pages

Colbert Coldwell  
December 2, 1986  
By Ruth Graham

Side A

G: Judge Coldwell, you are one of our best-loved and outstanding county judges. What do you consider your outstanding contribution during the years you served as county judge?

C: Surviving. [General Laughter]

G: I love that.

C: I can't think of any particular, important contribution. We started the present computer system, and when we put it in and started it, I didn't know anything about computers. And I don't think anybody else did, much, or still don't. But when we put it in, there was a lot of opposition. I remember Art Leibson wrote in the [El Paso] Times - he never wrote anything very good, about me anyway - that it was like using a bulldozer to clean the sidewalks to buy that computer. And the editor of the Herald-Post who was Pete Lee, said, "Well, the college had a great, big one up there and they couldn't use it all. So why didn't we take our work up there, the county take all their work up to the third floor of some building up on the 500-foot hill, had steps going up, and let them do it and it would be cheaper." Well, I never told him why did the college buy one that was so big they couldn't use it. We didn't do that because our business was down at the courthouse. And now since then, they've bought many larger ones and it's pretty well accepted that Charlie Terrazas, the county tax collector and assessor, he said, "We have a system now that

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can not be improved upon." And he even hired a lawyer, John Langford, to come up to commissioners' court meeting to fight it, but we didn't even bring it up, so that was a great disappointment to them, I guess. [Chuckles] But he never did use it as long as Charlie Terrazas was there, and the sheriff was almost the same way. Mike Sullivan. He was afraid some of the secrets would get out I think, and I think he was right. He didn't want to get it where somebody would have access to it, but now the sheriff uses it. The only person that ever started to cooperate much to use it was the County Attorney's Office. However, it was new and it takes time for something like computers to get installed.

Side B

C: This is some recollections of my family, the Coldwell family and the Eubank family, here in El Paso County, Texas. My great-grandfather, Nathaniel Colbert Coldwell, was born in May, 1822, in Shelbyville, St. Francis County, Tennessee. He was of an adventuresome spirit and evidently lived part of his early years after the death of his father with relatives in Texas and came to El Paso about 1840 in a wagon train which he was involved in, going to Chihuahua on the Santa Fe Trail from Independence, Missouri, to sell goods. Today incidentally is December 2, 1986. My great-grandfather, Nathaniel Colbert Coldwell, was again in El Paso with the Doniphan Expedition at the Battle of Brazitos. He served as interpreter with the Doniphan Expedition, having acquired the knowledge of Spanish from his previous trips throughout the El Paso area. After that he resided with his family at Navasota, Texas, which incidentally is the home of my wife, Ida Wesson Coldwell. Her great-

grandfather, Henry Shoemaker, started a cottonseed oil mill there in about 1870, and it is very probable and almost certain that he and my great-grandfather were acquainted during the years of the Civil War when Nathaniel Colbert Coldwell lived there with his family. Next, my great-grandfather came with his family, which included his wife Julia Mickey, Valdez or Val, his oldest son, my grandfather William Mickey Coldwell, another son Nathaniel Colbert Coldwell, [and] Aunt Mattie, whom I never met. In fact I never met any of them except my grandfather. I never met my great-grandfather; he died at the age of 70 in 1892 in Fresno, California, I believe, although he was living in Winfield, Kansas, at the time and was visiting his son Nathaniel Colbert Coldwell who was the father of Colbert Coldwell and Sedrick Coldwell, Colbert being the founding partner of Coldwell-Banker Company, the real estate firm.

The family came to El Paso in 1872, arriving here on Christmas Day after he had been appointed Collector of Customs by President Grant. The story is that he was acquainted with or knew Mrs. Grant's brother, who was killed in the Mexican War, and he visited with her during a visit to Washington, and although the object of the visit was not to obtain the post of Collector of Customs in El Paso, he received the appointment. He did not stay long in El Paso, but my grandfather, William Mickey Coldwell, being about 19 years of age at the time [did remain. He had been] born in 1855 in Arkansas State.

My great-grandfather was a lawyer as were two of his sons, William Mickey and Nathaniel Colbert Coldwell. They learned a great deal or most of their early law from their father, and the discussions were held at the dinner table and in their rooms at home, my Aunt Mattie having recorded this in the story about the family. William Mickey subsequently

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was in partnership here with J. P. Haigh, but going back to Nathaniel Colbert, he was a partner of Albert Fountain of later fame in New Mexico as representing the Cattlemen's Association and being murdered along with his son in the White Sands area. It is not clear to me why Nathaniel Colbert Coldwell left El Paso, but it is written in a family-type of records that he left as he did not feel comfortable having been opposed to secession both before and during the Civil War and felt that in Winfield, Kansas, he could be more compatible.

In any event, William Mickey Coldwell stayed here and raised a family of seven children, five boys and two girls. The oldest boy, Ballard Coldwell, was my father. Colbert Coldwell, my uncle, also stayed here and was in the real estate business. My aunt Julia married William Collins who was a long-time city clerk of El Paso, and they had two sons, my cousins Bill Collins and Hamilton Collins. My aunt Rina, whose name was actually Katherine although I did not know that until later on in life when she told me one day. She was always called Rina, R - I - N - A. Had one son that died at the age of four and no other children. Uncle Colbert had no children. The children of William Mickey Coldwell and his wife Stella Brink were Julia, Ballard, Philip, Rina, Hugh, and Harold. My father was a long-time judge of the 65th District Court and was the first judge to fill that post. [He became judge] in 1916 and he was born in 1886, so he was at the age of 29 or 30 and was in the post when he died in 1950 on December 2, which was the date of the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of El Paso County.

Judge Morris Galatzan just called. He calls every December 2 to me - and used to call my sister Eleanor 'til she died in 1984, April 22 - on the anniversary of my father's death. He has done this for many years

and never seems to forget although I forget myself. It is somewhat a coincidence that while I was dictating this and right at the point where my father died he should call at the same time, which was about 9:15 in the morning.

This is being recorded on December 4, 1986, 3:41 p.m. Early on in the 1920s my father, Ballard Coldwell commenced to buying farmland in the Clint area of El Paso County, and much of our life was centered around his farming efforts. He farmed the property with tenants who ideally at the start would have 40 acres each and a team of horses, as this was the common denominator that one man could work with a team of horses. I believe the first piece he acquired was from Uncle Johnny Shier in the Clint area which was behind the farm owned by my grandparents, John William and Jessie Stanfield Eubank. They had 120 acres on both sides of the Clint-San Elizario Road, most of it in orchards, apples, peaches, and pears with some blackberry and vine plots. My grandfather John William Eubank was an engineer but he also was a good farmer for orchards and all different kinds of plants. I remember my mother showing me an article that appeared in the newspapers in around 1910 or later showing his skills at growing different kinds of products in the Lower Valley. He had been County Surveyor and County Engineer and came to El Paso in about 1880 preceding the Texas and Pacific Railroad as he was one of those engineers who laid out the route. My grandmother Jessie Stanfield was from Michigan and was down here as a school teacher when he met her and married her in Michigan.

The farms my father bought were all bought on credit as he had no capital and only his salary as District Judge for income. It was a

difficult period and the farms had to carry themselves although he once stated to my wife Ida that he always knew this land was worth at least \$300 an acre intrinsically for farming purposes. He eventually had over 700 acres in cultivation with tenants. Every Saturday he would come down to pay the tenants' bills and give them an allowance of \$7 per week which was their draw which could support a family and which was as much as a man could make in a week on a farm in those days. Of course all this money was borrowed by him, and I have been with him on Saturday when he wrote the checks to pay their bills and on Monday when he was going around trying to borrow the money to cover the checks.

My mother at times would remonstrate with him when the economics were especially binding that if he would just get rid of the farms we could live very well on his salary as a District Judge which was \$500 per month and he would not be under the oppressive debts and strain which the farms brought. In any event Saturday was always a day to go to the farms and my sister Nina and I seemed to go with him most of the time, taking a large group of our friends with us in the pick-up period. This was true even in winter when we would carry blankets and quilts so we could ride in the back of the pick-up on the way home, as we came home often after dark and it would be very cold. But we did not suffer as we had these blankets and quilts. It was not hard to get other children to go with us as it was quite a lark. My father would have to go see about 10 tenants and would be in somewhat of a hurry. We would often disperse at a particular farm and if we did not show up when he called immediately, his disciplinary method was to have us hold out our hand and he would slap it. I remember my cousin Hamilton who went with us very often, Hamilton Collins, would occasionally pull his hand away so it would not be



slapped. He would then be dealt with a bit more harshly. On many occasions we would go by the Southwest Children's Home to pick up some children to go as a diversion for them. Victor More who ran the home and was a lawyer and a good friend of my father's, was in charge of the Southwest Children's Home along with his wife.

My father would wear old clothes from his wardrobe which had been worn out in service at the courthouse. These were good suits when he bought them, but through the usage and time had worn out and he had to put them aside for better clothes for going to the courthouse. He did not throw them away as they were well suited for the farm. From this comes the story that he would go to court and hold court wearing old, tattered farm clothes. This was not true, as he always dressed well in the courthouse and took pride in his appearance and dress. He would perhaps on occasion when he only had to sign a paper or two or something of that nature and be on the way to the farm appear at the courthouse in his farm clothes but never to hold court. Occasionally his shoes would have some manure on them because he would not have a chance to clean them up before he went to court.

I remember my grandfather William Mickey Coldwell, who was a tall man about 6'2" and of a slender build. He once said that no man who could not put his two hands around his waist and have them meet could call himself a gentleman. And he did refer to my father once to my mother as a tub of lard. My father was very heavy, getting up to 250 pounds at one time, I believe, being about 5'11" tall I believe, which was too much. My Uncle Hugh was also a heavy man. The rest of the brothers and sisters, however, never let themselves get overweight in any excessive way. My grandfather William Mickey was quite a scholar

according to the reports and could read in nine foreign languages and speak in seven, although I never heard him speak any of them nor did I see him read any. But I have some books now in German, Portuguese, and other languages which were his, and Mrs. Kelly, who used to be our librarian, said that when he came to library he would take out many books at one time, nine or ten or eleven, that would cover the subject he was interested in thoroughly. She said he was one of their best customers down at the public library. He was the dean of the bar in El Paso which only meant that he'd been practicing here longer than anyone else or before anyone else at the time of his death and also some years before that and made the first speech at the first El Paso Bar Association banquet. My father or some of the family had this reproduced and I still have many copies of this on hand. His wife, Stella Brink, my grandmother died in 1912, and I never knew her. He died in about 1927 as did my grandfather John William Eubank. My grandmother Jessie Stanfied Eubank died in 1949 when I was living in Navasota.

My mother Eleanor Eubank Coldwell was quite a raconteur and could entertain with her stories, which were mostly personal, about happenings and how life had been with my father. She had several fat ones which I can not recall. I quit listening to them. I wish I had listened to them better as everybody seemed to enjoy them immensely. One was about selling milk bottles so we could eat. Accumulated them first. In those days you got your milk in a bottle for which you paid a deposit, and that was almost like a savings account to her. She would accumulate them until the money would run completely out and then go to the store and trade 'em in. She had another one which I suppose was entitled, "The Fatted Calf."

There was another one which I do remember as I was somewhat involved in it, although I can not embellish it as well as my mother could or give the details. But we had a farm near the river at San Elizario, went right up to the river and at one time my father had quite a few horses there. He would buy quite a few horses and leave them with one of the tenants to be distributed to the others. These horses were stolen by bandits from Mexico and taken to Mexico. This was quite a loss, of course. I've forgotten how many horses there were, but there must have been 10 or 12, perhaps more, work-type horses, good quality horses as my father always bought good horses, many from the Mormon colony down in Mexico. They would often be unbroken and had to be trained, but they were good, big horses. In any event my father took to going to Juarez on many nights and he would always tell my mother that he was looking for the horses, that he was going around to bars and other types of places where conversations and knowledge about bandit-types might be obtained. My mother, of course, didn't believe this. She thought the horses were lost, and my father only used this to get out of the house and go see the boys, his cronies in Juarez. Juarez now and even more so then was a popular place. And you also must remember that this was during Prohibition in the late 20s, as I recall. In any event after this had been going on for six months, perhaps a little longer, he came in one day and said he had discovered the horses. And sure 'nuf, I remember one Sunday we all went in our old Dodge car, actually it wasn't that old - now it would be an old Dodge. Went over to Juarez and here came a bunch of rurales, who are Mexican country police, herding our horses down the road. They'd been discovered and were being delivered back. And this story my father told was evidentially truth or he found

the horses some other way.

I can remember that on more than one occasion, on Saturdays or even other days, I would ride down to the farm in the back of a pick-up, sitting on the lid of a coffin to keep it from blowing out. These coffins were kept in the basement of the county courthouse and were furnished free for indigent burials. My father being a habitue of the courthouse, of course, knew about this and when an occasion would arise when he knew of somebody in the Lower Valley that was in need of a coffin, he would go by and pick one up. They were unadorned and were merely a coffin-shaped pine box with a lid that would not fasten in any way on top. It would later be nailed under the top. But I would have to sit on top of the coffin in order to keep it from blowing off in the wind made by the travel in the truck. My grandmother Eubank always had a couple living in a small two-room house near her house, either as a worker or sometimes just living there. She'd like the protection, being a widow since 1927, and I remember the wife of one of the families living there being in a bad way and supposedly dying, about to die. So we duly, my father and I, took the coffin down and took it into the room where she lay, as the other room was a kitchen and was too small to admit the coffin. The family lived in the second, larger room. The husband, being solicitous, covered the coffin with cloth so it would not appear as bare. But the wife recovered, and upon seeing the coffin in the same room with her and knowing of her condition, was very incensed with her husband for having brought in the coffin and put it in the same room with her. She relapsed soon after but it did cause some unpleasantness between the man and his wife. I do not remember this man's name as I don't believe they were there very long. I do remember another family previous to them who

spent quite a bit of their time outside in the sun looking for lice in each other's hair. The women would. The men, of course, would be working.

This was immediately after and even during the time of the Mexican Revolution which officially went from 1910 to 1920 or 21, but repercussions of the war still there, and many refugee families, good people, had come out of Mexico seeking relief from the horrors that had gone on during their revolution in which it was reported that a million people out of a population of 20 million were killed. We had the Ruiz family and at one time three of their members were tenants on our farms. I know of four of them altogether. Let's see, there was Alfredo Ruiz who had the river farm, Alfonzo Ruiz who worked with my grandmother and was her foreman and ran her farm, Julio Ruiz who had the farm behind my grandmother's on Hanning Road, and then there was a younger one whose name I can't remember right now. Carmen was of such a family, and she started working for my grandmother at the age of 13 there at the farm at Clint, and died after my mother died in 1967. Carmen died a year later, in 1968, at 617 Mississippi Street which had been my mother's house and was in the employ of my sister Katherine at the time. She must have started working for my grandmother around 1920 or thereabouts.

All we ever spoke at home was Spanish until we went off to school. My sister Nina and I could not speak English when we first started school. I believe this was brought about mainly by my father who wanted us to be fluent in Spanish and also by the fact that we were in contact with Spanish-speaking people up until we went to school practically all the time. When we lived on Kansas Street, even though it was a fairly small house, we had a cook and a maid. I believe Martina Carrasco and

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... . They were probably paid about \$1 a week plus room and board. We had a cook named Maria, however she did not stay that long. Later we had a cook Esther Green on the house on Montana Street, but by then economic times were better and she was a fine cook and no doubt wages had increased very much. She had her own home which was torn down when Paisano Street was created for which she received adequate compensation.

Memoir ended by a discussion with child about birds, their nests and life spans. TV noise in background. More discussions with children.