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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Rudy Tellez

INTERVIEWER: Charles Martin

PROJECT: History of UTEP

DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 13, 1989

TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO: 772

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born El Paso, student TWC 1948-1952, lived in New York and LA as television producer. Outstanding Ex-Student UTEP 1970

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

El Paso native recounts experience as student at Texas Western College 1948-1952; jobs at local radio stations. In 1964 he landed a job with national television network, became producer of the Johnnny Carson Show and won 2 Emmys for TV work.

Length of Interview: 1 hour Length of Transcript 17 pages

Rudy Tellez
October 13, 1989
Professor Charles Martin
UTEP Diamond Jubilee

M: This is an interview conducted on October 13, 1989 by Charles Martin with Rudy Tellez on his school days and subsequent career at UTEP.

So why don't we start out by your telling me when you were a student here and how you happened to end up at UTEP?

T: I was a student at College Mines in the beginning . . .

M: Okay.

T: . . . when I entered. There were seven College of Mines all across the country, this was one of them. I entered this college then because I was a local boy. I went to El Paso High School, graduated there.

M: Ohh.

T: And this is where I wanted to stay and be, primarily because they had at that time a very good radio department. And since the age of nine I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a radio announcer. I wanted to be involved in the entertainment field, the communications media. I found a marvelous, wonderful instructor in Kelly Hall, Virgil Hicks. I was here from 1948 to 1952,when I graduated and went into the service. Briefly, I graduated from Texas Western 'cause by then it had changed to that name.

M: Right.

T: Luckily for me I was able to return in 1970's as outstanding ex-student from the University of Texas at El Paso. So I've filled the spectrum from one to the other, from one end to the other. Kelly Hall was at the top of the hill where we had the radio department. A lot of equipment there wasn't the best. It was not state of the art. It was mostly gifts

since radio stations and individuals would give equipment to the college. But Mr. Hicks was an excellent

teacher, not so much the freshman year, 'cause the freshman year you have to get your required classes, which means one has to get "the history of broadcasting and what's the FCC." I snored a lot [chuckles]. I thought of changing my major from radio to something else in the sophomore year. But the second year here I began to get the practical application of working . . . .

M: Umm hmm.

T: . . . the radio station. I went on the air, I think as a sophomore on KVOF at the time, the FM station, to gain my practical experience of actually being on-the-air. For some reason I guess I was born with a certain vibration in the voice, and it seemed to please the microphone. It was allright. I didn't come out screechy [voice screeches], and I didn't come out with an accent. Of course I worked through the accent in my early life. You see Charles. May I call you Charles?

M: Sure.

T: When I was kid I used to listen to the radio full blast, and I loved my imagination's pictures.

M: Umm hmm.

T: There was no television then, so I would tune in all the radio programs I could get from NBC 'cause there was only one station at the time, KTSM. And there was "Jack Armstrong, the All-American boy," and "Lux presents Holywood" and"InnerSanctum" and the wonderful 1939 version of Orson Wells' "War of the Worlds."

M: Sure.

T: Boy, that's growing up with imagination! I'm Chicano. In the true sense

of the word I'm born in this country of Mexican parents and spoke Spanish at home; learned English at school. But like all of the young kids who speak Spanish I didn't like accent; you see, my people, we have a very lazy mouth. We do not say "e's" very well. "E's" are difficult for some reason...so I practiced. I got every newspaper I could get and read it out loud so that I could try to sound like the radio announcers that I heard on KTSM and on NBC. So my dream was to do that. My dream was also that somehow along the way I would be able to leave my own mark in this business, and God put me in the right place at the right time. I suppose I will be able do some of that now. My first job in radio was when I was eighteen years old, just as I entered college, and I've been in radio for -- this is my fortieth year in this business. The first twenty years was in radio, the next twenty was in television, and my next twenty is going to be back in radio but as an owner. I am now trying to buy licenses and put my own radio stations on the air with my own choices of programming. But to get back to KVOF, that alone, that experience, coming in and pulling a shift on a board with a microphone, reading commercials, playing records, doing a program was the singular most important thing for me in my early career. There were three professors in the university who inspired me. One was Mr. Hicks, Virgil Hicks, the radio department, the other was Dr. Sonnichsen.

M: He was here today.

T: Yes, I wished I'd seen him. May be he'll be at the banquet tonight.

M: Probably.

T: I hope so. I'll see him then. He is one of my heroes too. His method of teaching inspired me to read voraciously. I hope that's the right word. I read everything. Today I read as many newspapers as I can and

magazines and books and everything, 'cause I think that's one thing I can get knowledge from. Another inspiration for me was Dr. Porter, my history professor. Those three men, through their one-on-ones with me, inspired me, got my imagination cooking. And as a matter of fact I came back after my two year stint in the army after the Korean War and I lacked twelve hours to get my masters degree, but I majored in English and minored and history at the time 'cause by then I was already in radio. I was already a success in radio. And that's a long answer to your question, but.

M: Just out of curiosity where did you grow up around El Paso High?

T: I lived on Fewel Street, which is right here in Sunset Heights.

M: Sunset Heights?

T: Yeah. I started out as a matter of fact, I got to tell you this Charles. Tonight my wife and I just came back from visiting the house where I was born.

M: Ahh. In Sunset Heights?

T: No, I was born at 3222 Frutas Street, which is right down in the worse part of town these days. I was born at home. My mother was afraid to go to the hospital. She didn't want them to give her the wrong kid. That's the way my mother is. She read a story where they gave the mother the wrong child, mixed them up. Well, she didn't want to take a chance, so I was born at home. I went to Beall Grammar School, and then I went to Vilas Grammar School, and then I left Vilas when my mother and I moved to Mesita and I attended only one year at Dudley Grammar school. I was in the last graduating class at Dudley Grammar School. They tore the school down or built something else there. Then I went to--I didn't want to go to junior high, that's the year they started junior high at El Paso, I

didn't want to do that. So I went to finish grammar school and went one year to El Paso High School and then we moved. My mother and I moved to California following my dad, chasing him all over California. I went to Gilroy High School, Santa Barbara High School and Hollywood High School and then came back and graduated from El Paso High School. At that time I was living on Fewel.

M: My son graduated from El Paso High, so that has an extra dimension for me, very fond of the school.

T: When I graduated from El Paso High I came right to the university here, at College of Mines. One of the reasons I came was not entirely because of the radio department, but you see, I got a music scholarship from this college. I've always felt grateful for that, not that we couldn't afford it, but for me to be playing music and trumpet well enough to be able to get a music scholarship was a plus for me.

M: Did you play in the band?

T: I played in the band, I played in the orchestra, [whispers] (Charles, I was drum major my last year). You know the guy with the tall hat, with a baton, and all those pretty girls marching behind him--I loved that. Yes. Go back to the yearbook, and you'll see me with the baton. I was a sight, I'll tell you.

M: So you got the practical experience here with working with radio. What kind of social activities were big on campus at the time you were here?

T: Well, let me see. Forty-eight through fifty-two, we saw the end of "innocence", I think. I don't know if I could go through life today, through college, with all the stuff that's available today. The sexual permissiveness, the drugs on the scene, I think I'm strong enough, I came from a strong family, but there is so much temptation out there, I'm not

sure how the kids handle it. When I was going to college here, I remember participating with all the other guys, and the thing of the year . . . was the panty raids,that was the thing to do. And we were foolish enough to try it. The social activities that I encountered that I liked were the drama club; I was in every musical thing there was. I worked as many hours as I could at the radio station to gain the experience. Anybody could say, "I can't make it today, will you come fill my three hours?" and I'd be there. There were not a lot of social things there. I did not join the fraternities.

M: Would you have been accepted into a fraternity?

T: I'll tell you clearly, Hispanics at that time were not looked upon as the mass class. There were lots of sororities and fraternities around and I never felt lesser than anyone else. Later on I was asked to join the Teeks [TKEs], and I became an honorary member but that was way, way when I was just getting ready to go to California and leave this town. And that's primarily because my mother ran the TKE house. But I never was asked, that I remember, I never did all that foolish stuff. But I never felt out of it. As a matter of fact, I don't remember in my entire life, Charles, now that you asked the question, I don't remember in my entire life ever being degraded except once, and that's when I went looking for a job, for work, as a radio announcer or as a correspondent at a local radio station here. And the guy said to me, "What would you say if I told you that I wouldn't hire you because you're name is Tellez?" And it shocked me, took me back; I never heard that before. I said, "Well, tell you the truth I feel sorry for you." He said, "What do you mean?" "You might miss the chance of working with someone who really could do a good job for you." The guy hired me by the way, I got the job, but that's the

way I answered. That's the only time I remember that ever happening to me.

M: So otherwise, things were reasonably open in those days, they just evaluated people reasonably well on their individual merit?

T: Yes, yes, absolutely. And of course I had other things to work out. I mean I was in the ROTC, and that's how I went into the service as a Second Lieutenant following my graduation here. I look back at times with a great deal of favor and happiness. I never regreted being what I am, coming from where I came.

M: You seemed to have particularly liked performing if you consider radio if it's considered performing art in a sense.

T: Precisely. I've always been on. As a kid I would play Al Jolsen, play the records and mimic him, "Black face", do the whole number. I would tell jokes, I love to do standup if I can, even today I can tell a joke if you just lay something on me. Yes, I enjoyed that. But you see that all that did very, very well for me...For what I was going to do when I finally realized my dream of becoming a radio announcer, then starting to produce my own radio show, and then I realized that my longevity, my strong suit, was producing. If I want to stay on the air or work in this business a long time, I did not have Hugh Downs' voice. I would not be a good network radio announcer--[in a deep voice] with that style for a long period, but I could be around as long as I wanted to if I created my own shows or produced them.

M: Let me go back and discuss a little bit about these three professors that you mentioned. You said Hicks, Sonnichson, and Porter. Could you tell me just a little bit more about what you remember about classes or dealings with them.

T: Yes. Porter was not tyrannical, but he ran a strong, hard class. He wouldn't put up with any--bullshit--from anybody. If you didn't know he ignored you. But if you did know, he would try to give you the best of what he had. His knowledge is what impressed me tremendously. But he would sit there, and he would make it interesting. He would talk about Russia, and when I left the classroom I would feel that, I had been a part of that somehow. Porter was strong, and I liked that. He made history come alive for me in a way that no other professor had. You'll have to ask some of the other students how he did that. He did his homework. He would come in ready, but he would sit there on the desk with his little blazer on and talk briskly and ask you questions, and if you didn't know he'd forget you. He made sure you got what you wanted out of it. Sonnichson is funny and humorous. Sonnichson had a warmth about him that was unlike any other professor. I mean I would make jokes in class, and he would laugh louder than anybody else or wouldn't cut me down for it. He would ask students things like, "Today we're going discuss so and so in literature . . . and can anybody tell me who the goddess of dance is." And no one would say anything, and I'd say, "Terpsichore," and he'd say, "Oh, is that one of your favorites?", I'd say, "As a matter of fact, no." And, of course, he'd laugh and break up. But he would like that kind of thing. But, again, he made English Lit come alive for the student, but I like what he did for Western UT. I mean, he invented that whole style of writing. Judge Roy Bean. He would read to us. And he would take on all parts. He would also perform. But his knowledge is what did it; he got me to reading. I mean he wasn't the guy who said, "And this is an adjective and a verb" and all that other stuff. He got me excited about what was behind the writing, and I would

go to it. Hicks was good because he was a radio man. He'd served as a salesman, he'd been on the air, and he did not have a very good voice, a little nasal, from Iowa I believe. But he allowed you to take chances. He would say, "OKay the assignment tomorrow is so and so," and you come in prepared, and if you're not you still went through the thing on the microphone, and they would critique you. "Okay, what did he do wrong, what did that sound like?" And we would try to do as best that we possibly could. And then he would listen. He would go home, and he wouldn't listen to local radio stations. KVOF was on his dial at all times, and whoever was on, and he'd come back the next day and say, "Listen, that's not the way you pronounce that word." Or "this is not what you do. How come there's so much dead air." I'll never forget that he was able to get a couple of tape machines and we learned how to play with them, and we learned how to make an echo. Record on one machine and play back a few seconds later on the other tape. [What] you do is K . K . K . K . K . V . V . O . F . F, and sometimes we'd do so loud that we'd damage his speakers at home, and he wouldn't like that. So he said, "You can overuse that, that's a device, an echo chamber, but let's not make it a religion." I always felt as though he cared, that he was listening. He wasn't just a professor who came and sat down and said, "Okay, here's the lesson plan, go do it and then turn off." So that's basically the way they taught.

M: How wide a range was the signal from, was it KVOF?

T: KVOF was only heard here on campus. Only on campus' closed circuit. Then he got a ten watt transmitter, and then you could hear it maybe a mile away. And then, before I left they had gotten the bigger power. I don't remember what it was. But on one of my happiest times was in 1970,

I came back as theOutstanding Ex-Student, and he walked up at the banquet, and they gave me the microphone I used to speak over on KVOF-FM. I still have that somewhere at home. Now the station is called something else. What do they call themselves?

M: KTEP.

T: KTEP, right.

M: And it's one of two public radio stations in the city now.

T: They broadcast PBS as well.

M: Right.

T: What's the power?

M: That I don't know, but I think it's heard, can be heard throughout the city, and close by.

T: Well, that's great. The opportunity to be able to do that for students is incredible.

M: Well, let ask you what you did when you began to leave UTEP. You said you first went to the military.

T: Two years, Second Lieutenant, discharged as a First Lieutenant in the Aircraft Artillery School, Fort Bliss. I served there for two years. I did not go to Korea; I served in the Zone of Interior the entire two years.

M: What interior?

T: Zone of Interior, ZI, it's called the USA, continental US. I left the service in '54, went to work for radio station KEPO, which is no longer KEPO, I believe. Then KTSM called, offered me a job, and I was with them until 1959. At the end, when I left to go to San Francisco in 1960, I was there four years on the air. There was a saying in San Francisco, "Don't go San Francisco looking for parttime work; Rudy Tellez has it

all." I did. I worked for every radio station and television station in that town.

W: At the the same time [wife whispers].

T: At the same time. You're right. Finally I created a program called the "Les Crane Show." I'm said to be one of the "grandfathers" of talk radio. I helped invent that entire call-in show format, although I had done the call-in format here at KTSM when Ted Bender was doing "Open Mike." In '64 I went to New York with the "Les Crane Show". It was the most successful television show in the history of New York, for in ten months the "Les Crane Show" was on network on ABC. The first competition Johnny Carson ever had. We were on from 11:30 to 1:00 o'clock on ABC, while he was on NBC. We failed in 16 weeks and I wanted to know why that show worked and all the others didn't. I went to work for the "Carson Show". I was there for five and a half years, culminating as his producer and inventing a lot of different things that he still does today, including the anniversary show that's coming up on the twenty-six.

M: Ah, yes.

T: Yeah, I did the first one. I'm trying to think of . . . yeah that's basically it.

M: What's been the high . . . you would say, so far anyway, the high point of your career on radio and television. Working at the "Carson Show"? Is there anything else in particular that . . . ?

T: Yeah, it's different. Every show and every opportunity that you're given is, I think, a different high. For instance, no one had ever taken a local show, like the "Les Crane Show," from the San Francisco market, and taken it national as we had done. It was my program, I owned it. No one had gotten as high ratings on "The Tonight Show" as I helped it get. As

a matter of fact, the highest rating in the history of broadcasting still belongs to a show I did on "The Tonight Show". You may remember it, Charles. Where were you on December 17, 1969 . . . from 11:30 till 1:00?

M: Undoubtedly at Tulane, in a dorm.

T: Were you watching television late at night at all? Did you ever hear of Tiny Tim's Wedding?

M: Oh, I must have watched that I'm sure, or I'm know I've seen it. I don't know if I watched it originally or the replays. I certainly watched it.

T: There was a replay on the Anniversary Show, that's about the only place it would replay. But that's, believe it or not, that's the show which got an 89 share of audience, a 35 rating at 11:30 at night, an 89 share. The highest share ever in the history of broadcasting for any entertainment show. There's only one other program that's got a higher rating, or a higher share. It wasn't "Who Shot J.R." and it wasn't all the famous shows you can think of, except there was one program that got a 91 share. Can you think of that one, Charles? That means that everybody except 9% percent of the audience was watching.

W: It took place in Texas.

T: Yes, matter of fact, no, well, it started in Texas and went on. All three networks carrying the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. ABC, CBS, and NBC, they were all feeding the same program and one got a 91 share. It was a news program. Four days that stopped the world.

M: One of the networks ran on one of their specials on how the media handled that. I remembered taping that, this last year when they were going over that, and watching, they were re-broadcasting the live footage rather than editing it. They were broadcasting it in the original chunks. I recorded a lot of that.

T: But we were glued to the television set for those four days. But anyway those are highlights. I think that what I'm doing now is a highlight of my life, in that I am just becoming involved with a new technology that is going to change the face of televion--if it works. It is the most exciting thing that I've ever been involved with, but that's a development, a technology rather than a program. It has to do with some new technology, scientific, coming out of Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I'm now residing. I did the "Battle of Network Stars"; no one had ever done that before. I did the "Tomorrow Show" with Tom Snyder, no one had ever done that before.

W: "Both Sides Now"

T: Well, "Both Sides Now," that's what I got one of my Emmys for, one of my Emmy's for. That was a local program in Los Angeles and ostensibly presented a host who leans a little to the left and a guy who leans a little to the right--conservative/liberal. Then you put a controversial guest in between them and let them go at one another and themselves. Obviously the conservative will defend the conservative, the liberal will try to tear him apart. The conservative was George Putman, newsman from Los Angeles, very conservative, and the liberal was Mort Saul. And in eight days the two guys began to kill each other on the air. It took eight days for them to hit venom and strike back. The show lasted only a month after that, but it was so spectacular, and the idea was right. They lost a lot of money too, because the show could have been syndicated. I've been in a lot of places. I've been ahead of my time a lot of times. So now I'm ready to pull back and play catch-up, and do some other things. But those are all highlights.

M: How many did you win? You said one of.

T: Two. I was nominated for five; I won two Emmys. I was nominated for the "Tonight Show." I was nominated for a sports show I did, the World Series Pre-Game. I had Jose Feliciano return to television after being blackballed when he sang the "Star Spangled Banner" in Detroit in 1961. To hear him sing the "Star Spangled Banner" in that style in 1961, people said, "That's heresy. That's terrible." Now listen to it the way Lionel Richie sings it or Aretha Franklin, but in those days it was unheard of to sing our anthem any way but straight.

M: I used to have some of his albums, or at least an album anyway.

T: So I brought him back to TV with his story and NBC put him on, and I took him to Henry Street, where he grew up as a Cuban kid and played stick ball. Feliciano really used to hit the ball. You see he goes to movies too, as does Ray Charles. "How do they", you may ask. Blind people have another way of seeing. When you lose one sense, one facility, your body and senses create something else. In baseball, they do it by listening to the broadcast. Vince Scully paints pictures for people. Anyway, we did that and it was nominated for an Emmy. Sports, I was nominated for an Emmy for . . . I can't remember now, but I know I won two of them. Cause I've got them--as door stops.[Laughter] Somewhere.

M: And you won one for the "Both Sides Now". .

T: Yes. The other was for "John Barber's Other Show". John Barber was a critic in LA, and I did a show with him that would take on a different subject from Steven Spielberg to whatever we came up with nightly. And he was a very good host. Then I did a one hour special. And that's probably why I got the Emmy. Remember when New York was in such trouble they were going broke?

M: Mmh, sure.

T: Well we produced the First Annual Telethon To Save New York City. Guess what we raised? $623 in Los Angeles. And we took it to the mayor of New York. And he was very gracious. I have a picture of him accepting the check from John Barber. So, what I did was a take-off on all the bad telethons. We had a guy that would play a toilet seat, you know, that was his big act. We auctioned off Peter Falk's trench coat. But it was a live telethon and we couldn't take call-ins; we wouldn't take checks or anything, you had to come to the studio and physically put your money in the fish bowl, and then we'd accept that to save New York City--the first annual telethon. So that was tongue-in-cheek but it was done well so that my peers thought it deserved an Emmy. And I guess it did, I don't know.

M: It almost sounds like something from Saturday Night Live.

T: Yeah, yeah. I guess. .

M: Some of their things sound like that maybe.

T: Anything else?

M: Well, I was just going to say, was there anything else that happened while you were in El Paso or at UTEP that we didn't touch on that stands out as being particularly significant or interesting?

T: I've watched this campus grow. I haven't watched the students that much, 'cause I'm not around, I will more and more as I come back here, living closer in Santa Fe. But, I've watched with pride some of the things that have happened. It's unfortunate the scholastic side doesn't bring as much honor to the university as the sports does, doesn't it? When UTEP was number 1 in the nation, the NCAA, my God! When Bob Beamon broke the record, my God! And yet, when the football team does badly, the university seems to suffer along with it. I wish there was some other

way to get around it. I guess the only way is to get out of sports entirely, isn't it? Has that been discussed here at all?

M: Most schools consider that almost heresy. Especially in the South and Southwest. Some schools get away with it but not very many. You have to have a special niche.

T: Yeah, it's, it's a shame. Because I am asked to speak before students now, students at risk. And I find that what they really are looking for is some kind of inspiration. Coming from Los Angeles, we used to live in Hollywood, and there's a school there that is probably the greatest mixture of Hispanic, Filipino, Asian, and Blacks, I mean if there are 10% WASPS or 8%, I mean, I'd be very surprised. And that school won the Olympics, the Knowledge Olympics, what are they called?

M: Olympics of the Mind?

T: Yes. They won it last year.

M: What school was that?

T: John Marshall. And those kids, you should see them, you walk down the street, they're talking fifteen different languages now. But, guess what, this one teacher inspired them so much that they got the knowledge and they beat everyone else in the United States. Which shows that knowledge is real power. It's what the Hispanic teacher did to the Hispanics in the movie, Standing Tall, or--

M: Stand And Deliver.

End of Side 1

M: . . .Goes through there. .

T: I just think we need more role models. Fewer sports. I'll tell you something that I'm going to tell the kids tomorrow--something I told the

Kids today at this Roberts Grammar School. Fernando Valenzuela said it, he says it to all the people, all the kids that he meets. He says, "You know, I'm in sports and in sports you win and in sports you lose, but in education you only win." And it's so true; it really is.

M: That sounds like a good place to end.

End of interview.