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Interview no. 777

Jose I. Oaxaca

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Jose L. Oaxaca
INTERVIEWER: Dr. Charles Martin
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 21, 1989
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO: 777
TRANSCRIPT NO: 777
TRANSCRIBER: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in Juarez, elementary-high school in El Paso barrio, student UTEP 1982-1986.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Tells of childhood in Juarez and El Paso barrio, recalls experience as engineering student in the 1980s, how scholarship helped him, his job after graduation at Bell Helicopter.

Length of Interview: 30 minutes Length of Transcript 15 pages

Jose I. Oaxaca (Bedford, Texas)
Wednesday, September 20, 1989
Telephone Interview
Interviewed by Charles H. Martin (El Paso)
UTEP Diamond Jubilee (75th Anniversary)

M: Why don't we start, just by your mentioning when and where you were born and then when you came to the United States.

O: I was born in Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico and we came to the United States, I think in 1973. I was in the fourth grade, so I was like 11 years. My parents got divorced when I was six, so it was just me, my mother, two brothers and a sister.

M: Okay. Now you went to the public schools here, which high school did you attend and when did you finish there?

O: Okay, I was at Bowie High School from 1978 to 1982 and I graduated in May of 1982.

M: When we were talking earlier, you had mentioned, I think some reference to going to school in English and then speaking Spanish at home, so I wonder if you might just explain a little bit about how you acquired English and how you functioned back and forth a little bit that way.

O: Well, in the beginning it was hard. When we first moved here to the United States I went to school in Ysleta, Marion Manor Elementary School, and I had Anglo teachers and most of them were Anglos so it was very hard. I couldn't talk to anybody, and then a year later we moved to South El Paso where I think like 90 percent of the population is Mexican, so that helped me. And the elementary school I was going to was 100 percent Mexican, so that helped in the way that I could talk to people, I could talk to everybody, so that made a little bit easier. Even though I probably learned less English I think it helped me in the long run, because it wasn't as hard for me, I could communicate with

people, ask questions and all that. So I probably didn't learn as much English as I could as fast but I think it made it a lot easier for me. As far as I can remember I couldn't carry on a regular conversation in English until I was like 14 or 15 years old. It took me like a couple, three, probably four years to really get to where I could talk to a person in English and understand

M: And feel comfortable . . .

O: Yes, get my point across and all that.

M: Okay, did your mother also try to learn or did she just remain primarily a Spanish speaker?

O: She tried but it was too hard for her, so she tried but it was so hard that she just gave up and never tried again. Honestly, I know she tried but I don't know how hard and now she didn't learn at all.

M: So when you would be at home then?

O: Oh yeah, it was like Spanish all the time and television in Spanish. If you tried to put an English channel she would get mad at you because she wouldn't understand it. So yeah, home was Spanish and school was with Spanish and only with the teachers did we speak English. And it's funny, when I was at Bowie High School, my junior or senior year, I wanted to transfer to Coronado High School so that I could learn more English, so that when I started college I could do better, and they didn't let me but I tried. [Laughter]

M: Okay, so lets turn from Bowie until when you did come over to college and you came to UTEP. What were your very first impressions when you arrived at UTEP and began your first classes?

O: I think the biggest shock was I wasn't disciplined enough. High school was so easy. Homework you could do like ten minutes before classes. And

OAXACA

I wasn't used to doing that much homework and studying that much, it was so easy. And then I got to college and I started getting into trouble when I had a lot of homework and what I started doing . . . at the beginning I started real good, doing all my homework and then after a while I would not do my homework in the afternoon and then at night do my homework. So the next day I would go to class, fall asleep during the afternoon and do my homework at night. That's not very good. I think you should do your homework in the afternoon and sleep at night, but it didn't work out. It took me a couple of semesters to recover. After that I learned my lesson.

M: What other impressions should you have of the University that were different or startling or . . . ?

O: Oh it was very different, obviously. Like Bowie High School, I don't know if you are familiar, probably 99 percent are Mexicans, and a few blacks and a few anglos. Then you go to college and it's completely the opposite. I don't know the percentages but certain percentage are anglos and mexicans, and people from other countries, all over the world. That was the big difference right there, that really surprised me right there. As far as teachers and all that, it was more independent. I liked the idea that you didn't have to go to class if you didn't want to--I did obviously, but that wasn't obvious. In high school you had to be there all the time. In college if you didn't want to you didn't have to. It was funny, before I got married I wanted to be a professional student. I wanted to go school all my life and have the government pay my school, scholarships and stuff and not have to work, but once I got married I said, "I guess I can't do that anymore."

M: What did you do in thinking about a major and how did you finally chose a

major?

O: I think that was real easy because ever since I can remember I've always been real good in math. Since I was in Mexico I was real good in math, so in the 7th grade and 8th grade I got involved in the math team in junior high and high school. I was in math competitions and all that. And then if some people know that you're good in math they want to get you into computers, so I got offered to do a lot of computer programs. When I was in 7th grade I went to a computer summer class in technical school in El Paso. And then when I was in high school as a freshman I went to that summer engineering program. So when I started college I knew what I wanted to be: I wanted to be an electrical engineer because they made a lot of money, supposedly. [Laughter]

M: Supposedly, right.

O: And because it was math related and it was funny, I wanted to be a computer programmer more than an electrical engineer but programming was so easy for me, it was so natural. I mean I could do it so easy that it wasn't challenging, so I said, "I can always learn programming, I already knew as a matter of fact. I'm going to go with something more challenging." so I went into "Double E," [EE, electrical engineering] only because computer programming was so easy, and it [EE] was a challenge, believe me.

M: Let's see, did you work while you were attending UTEP?

O: Yeah, I had to. Yeah, I had been working since I was a sophomore in high school. Through the summers, one summer worked in the construction, [????????] And the following summer I started working in a pharmacy, Sun Drugs, as a clerk. So all my high school, junior and senior year and on Saturdays, I would work at the pharmacy. When I started college I kept

on working at the pharmacy, mainly on Saturdays, like ten hours on Saturdays, some afternoons. Then I learned about Work-Study programs, and I was more interested in staying in school. That way I could go to work in school and after work go to the library and do my homework. So when I was a sophomore I got a Work-Study program and I worked in the Special Academic services for a year. I was mainly helping recruit students, sending information to students through the mail. When I was a junior I transferred to another department, a similar department, was New Student Relations, and what they did there was scholarships, and I took care of a computer and did reports for the director and [????????], and since I had a scholarship myself, it was interesting. And then when I was a senior I took this co-op job. It was like part-time co-op. I would work like 19 hours a week and then go full-time to school. I would go to Juarez everyday and then comeback, and then go to school. Everyday was like that.

M: Who did you work for and what kind of responsibilities did you have?

O: You thinking about the co-op job?

M: Yes.

O: It was Packard Electric, a subdivision of General Motors. What they did was, they produced harnesses for GM cars. I started as what they call Assistant to the Engineer. So first it was learning how the company worked, what they did, the first few months. After that I started with programming. I'm real good with programming. Started getting involved with the computer, I rewrote some other programs, modified some of their programs, and wrote some new programs. But I also liked doing hard work with electrical engineering, so I kind of divided my time like half and half, programming half, electronics, helping the engineers in line. It

was good because I got a lot of experience. So when I got my first job, my first real job, it was a big shock. I knew what to expect. I'm grateful because if I look back right now, if I hadn't had that co-op job I don't know if I'd done as good as I did over here. So I think everybody should go to co-op.

M: What kind of clubs and organizations did you belong to while you were at UTEP?

O: A lot of them. First I joined what they called the Association of Engineers. This is the one that people go crazy once a year and paint people green--this is the first one I joined. Then I joined the Mexican-American Engineers Society, since I was a sophomore, for three years. Then I joined "I Triple E" [IEEE], Institute of Electrical Electronic Engineers, IEEE, I was in that for about two or three years. Then I also got accepted into the Electrical Engineers Honor Society, they called Eata Kappa U. I also got accepted to the Senior Honor Society when I was a senior, Mortar Board. I also joined the Interscholastic Council. That's about it.

M: That's enough to keep you busy, am I right.

O: Yeah, right.

M: When you were attending UTEP, where did you live and how did you go back and forth.

O: The first two years . . . when I was going to high school I started going to UTEP. They had a new program called Senior Scholars [where] you were allowed to take college courses while in high school. So when I was a junior during my summer I took Calculus I at UTEP. Junior in high school I took Calculus I at UTEP. Then when I was a senior I took Calculus II at UTEP.

OAXACA

M: What was the name of the program, again?

O: Junior Scholars.

M: Oh yes, okay.

O: I think me and this other guy were the first one, believe it or not. We were like, in other words, the guinea pigs. And we did pretty good, I guess [?????]. My junior year in high school I took Calculus at UTEP, I got an "A" in that class. My senior year in high school I took Calculus II, I got a "B" in that class. Then when I started UTEP, my freshman ... (I think I rode the bus) I had to ride the bus my freshman year, all year long. Then my sophomore year my mom lent me her car, so I used her car for a year and a half. Then when I was a junior I finally had enough money to buy my first used car. It lasted me like a year; it was sort like a \$900.00 car. It was a big '76 Plymouth, and I'm terrible with cars, I mean I don't know anything about mechanics.

M: Automotive engineering is not your specialty, huh?

O: Not at all, so I'm terrible. It was a good car but I didn't know anything about cars, I really didn't like to fix it. I think it lasted me about a year, just about 12 months that's it. After that I think my mom lent me her car again. I didn't have a car, a new car until I got this job. I got this job and I knew I needed a car, so I went and bought a new one.

M: What did you think about juggling work and study, and juggling going home and coming back and forth?

O: It wasn't obviously hard, I would have preferred to not work. Go out of classes then go to the library do your homework and then have fun at night, but that was impossible. So I just lived with it I guess. If I had a choice I wouldn't have worked, but I didn't have a choice. I had to

OAXACA

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accept it I guess. It wasn't that easy but it's "do able." I don't know if you what I am saying, just accept it. What can you do about it.

M: That's true.

O: You were asking me about coming back and forth. What I usually did, was go to class-- like go to class in the morning, from about eight to 12, or seven to 11. I usually take two classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays and three classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. In the afternoon I would go to work like from 12 to five and then come home and eat and then go back up to UTEP to the library like from six/six-thirty to eleven-thirty or twelve. Come home and stay up until three in the morning. Sleep like four hours and go back to school and all over again. That was usually my schedule right there, for four years. Then I went to summer school every year, but I would only take like one class, so it wasn't that bad.

M: And you could work more in the summers probably?

O: Yeah right. Actually I worked full-time during the summer when I was a co-op. That was good.

M: When did you graduate from UTEP?

O: I graduated in May 1986, with a Bachelors in Electrical Engineering.

M: Do you remember commencement? Did your mother or others come to the ceremony?

O: Oh yeah, yeah. My brother was in the Navy at that time. He was in Virginia, he was stationed in South ??????, Virginia. And he came over for my graduation, and my grandparents and my mom--I remember.

M: Oh your grandparents came also?

O: Oh yeah. My mom's parents live here in the United States, so they came.

M: Okay, and what did you tell me before: you were the first one to graduate from college in your family?

OAXACA

O: Yeah, high school and college actually. My brothers I guess they didn't like school, they ????? about high school so I was the first one to graduate from high school and college.

M: How did your mom feel about your completing the degree?

O: Oh yeah, she was real proud. If it had been up to her all of us would have graduated from high school and college because she never forced us to work to help. She always told us that school was more important because once you have the education you can do more for yourself. She never told me to work; I worked because I knew she needed help, because I needed some money for gas and to eat and all that. But she never told me, "go work" or anything like that. She told me school first, once you graduate then you can spend your money. My brothers, they didn't go to school because they didn't want to, not because they didn't have a chance.

M: What have you been doing since you got your degree from UTEP?

O: My first three months I still worked for Packard Electric. It was in October that was my last day, Halloween Day of '86. They couldn't make me an offer because they had a hiring freeze, so I told them I wasn't going to work for them anymore if they didn't give me an offer. I was unemployed for three months: November, December, January. After I left Packard Electric I sent out letters to companies. My mistake was that I wanted to stay at Packard Electric so my senior year I didn't interview with many companies because I was almost sure they were going to make me an offer and I didn't have to worry. But when they told me I couldn't, well . . . I only interviewed with like ten companies. [????????] When I didn't work for them anymore, when I stopped working for them I wrote letters to, I think Rockwell International, McDonnell Douglas, Bell

DAXACA

Helicopter, well like eight companies, and El Paso Electric Company, I interviewed with them. I had some interviews at UTEP too. The El Paso Electric Company called me back for a final interview, there's another company in El Paso, Nielsen Clearing House, they have a company by the airport, they also have twin plants in Mexico. They called me . . . they made me an offer actually. Bell Helicopter called me like in November. It was funny, they couldn't get in touch with me and they couldn't leave a message because my mom didn't know any English. So my mom would tell me, "Somebody called you but I don't know who it was." I would say "Come on Mom, take a message." "I don't know who they were they didn't know any Spanish and I don't know any English." So finally they called me and they asked me if I was interested in coming for an interview with them, so I said yes. They flew me over here the week before Christmas for an [on site] interview and then when I went back to El Paso, it was like a month later, like in January, I talked to them in December over here in Bedford, Texas. In then January this company ????? called me and made an offer. But I really wanted to leave town because I was ready to leave town. I was ready to go on my own. I called Bell back and told them, "So are you going to make me an offer or not because I have another company making me an offer." They told me, "Oh yeah, we'll make you an offer; don't take the other one." I waited for them to make me an offer about a week later. I started working for Bell in February 1987, until now.

M: Looking back on it, if you were to sum up your own philosophy about what you were doing about hard work or making it a success or anything, what, what were your basic ideas about getting ahead or work or whatever as you were doing all of this.

O: Ah, I don't know, ah, if I'd answer the question real good. .

M: Ahm, like you were telling me once before that you had sort of this idea that one person can make it if they really work hard or just fight. . . difficulties, I mean. . . just thinking of how, what would you say your philosophy on education, work, and trying to get ahead or, what motivated you to work at all of these things, I mean, this obviously wasn't easy.

O: Yeah, well, I had a lot of examples like my Mom, she always making minimum (probably), my brothers (they were making minimum probably, too), and I saw how hard it was for them and then when I worked that summer at the construction work. It was like 100 degrees outside and you had to be out there sweating and sunburned. And then I got a job as a pharmacist clerk, air conditioned. So I don't know, I just started thinking that I didn't want to that all my life. I mean work \$3.35 an hour, you buy a hamburger and there goes one hour of your work, so you know, I just didn't want to that all my life. I wanted to be able to have a better life, the American dream: have a house, two cars, be able to go on vacation once in a while. I have always set goals for myself, I want to this, and then once I get there I set more goals. So I always had a goal, like first I wanted to be an engineer. Well, first I wanted to graduate from high school, that was my first goal. Then later on I wanted to be an engineer and now I am an engineer. Now I want to be the president of Bell Helicopter, probably. So I guess, seeing how my mom had to support four of us, my two brothers, my sister and me, on a minimum wage salary, it wasn't real easy for her. Sometimes she had two jobs because she couldn't do it. She had to work like in the morning to afternoon and then at night, two jobs so that she could have enough money for us, feed us and everything. I just saw all that and I was real young, and people think that when you're young you don't say anything,

but I used say a lot things. I just didn't like the way we were living. As soon as I graduated from college I told my mom, "You know what, let's get out of the neighborhood." Because we used to live in Projects [Government Housing] and I told her I don't want to live here all my life. I just wanted to get out of there, I wanted a better life for her.

M: When you look back at your years at UTEP, can you sum up what UTEP contributed as its part to your development?

D: Oh yeah, it's a good question. It's funny, when I first got the Co-op job and when I first got this job too, you come out of school, I don't know if it's just the ????? barrio or just me. I mean when I started college in "Double EE", and I told myself, when I finish school I should be able to fix a television. Seriously, I thought that was what was going to happen. And then I graduated and I said, "I don't anything." I felt more stupid than before. The more you learn the more stupid you feel because the more you learn the more you know what you don't know. So I felt so stupid and I got this job and I was so insecure that I said, I don't know if I'm going to be able to make it. And then I was afraid of failure because all your family is looking up at you, you know the feeling, everybody is looking up at you, you're the only one to graduate from college and then you go and fail. All the pressure on your shoulders makes you nervous. I'm not going to make it, they're going to tell me that I'm a failure and you'll be surprised how much you learn from college. I learned a lot from ?????, that I ??????. When I first got this job, my supervisor told me, "All you do is time this interface with the two computers, here's the documentation, okay do it." It took me like two months and I did it and it worked. When I was finished, I asked myself, "How did I do that?" You're just so stunned

OAXACA

that you don't know . . . I guess they teach you how to think mainly. How to put up with pressure, how to think, how do things. When you're there you think that you have to memorize a lot, but I guess that's not the point, the point is how to use the information that they give to you. But you do learn a lot, more than you're thinking. As for as I know, I did. Down in ??????, I know people here from Texas A&M, Purdue, Brigham Young, and they're not that smart. I think we're just as smart as they are, and I'm from UTEP. I think I'm smarter than some of those guys that went to those big schools. So I guess it's up to the individual. UTEP is a good school.

M: Okay. All right, that's pretty much the list of questions--oh with one exception. I see there's one question that I didn't ask you. I meant to ask you in the middle, because I think it happened in the middle. Why don't you tell me a little bit about when you went through the naturalization process?

O: Oh, [when you] become a U.S. citizen.

M: Right.

O: Oh there's a funny story there. I think I'd been wanting to become a U.S. citizen since I was 18 years old, because that's when I was eligible. And I had the application. I filled it out. I had there for a couple of years, (I was late to turn it in). And there was some money, I think it was \$25.00 and I don't think the money was a problem, I think I just paid it. Then when I was a sophomore in college I started looking into ???????? both of them you have to be a citizen to get a job. So I told myself, "Oh oh, I'd better turn it in if I want to get a job." So I turned in my application. I think I became a citizen in January 1984, or '85 or '86. I turned my application, it took a year for them to call me.

And they called me back to take the test. And that day they called me back I had a test on, I think it was electromagnetic fields at UTEP, and I went to talk to a professor and I told him I have to go to court because I'm going to become a U.S. citizen. He told, "No, they can wait." [Laughter] Seriously, he wouldn't let me. So I had to call back and tell them I can't make it, I'm going to make another date because I have a test and they won't let me. I postponed it and they called me back again, and I had another test that day but it was another professor and he was real nice, he told me "Go ahead, I can always give you a make up." So I went and took the test and it was so easy. Then after you take the test and you pass, they ask you some basic questions of history and they make you right some sentences in English, so they know you know English. Then they make you read a sentence. I took the test and two months later I became a citizen.

M: Do you remember the swearing in ceremony, whatever the ceremony is?

O: Oh yeah. I remember the judge was Hudspeth or something like that.

M: Oh yeah, Harry Hudspeth.

O: Yeah. You go in and he comes in and he talks about the United States, about the country ??????????. And then you say the "Pledge Allegiance to the Flag" and then they call your name and give you your certificate and that's about it. Nothing big. I think the day was January 16, 198. . . , '84 or '85, I don't remember right now, I think '84.

M: Is there anything else you can think of that I didn't ask you that you wanted to add or not? That's all the questions I had written out.

O: No not really. I think we covered pretty much about everything.

M: Well, as I said this is for our Diamond Jubilee Project, which goes into the permanent Oral History Collection, along with that other interview,

and in this case, since we've got the other one, I probably won't send you a copy of this transcript edit, specifically unless we have some problems with making out words or something. But if sometime after a couple of months anyway, you'll probably get some little notice from us acknowledging it again. So don't be alarmed if you don't hear anything from us immediately . . .

O: Will you publish it all, do you know?

M: We're going to do some later on and that's when you'll hear from us, but our intent anyway will be to use excerpts from it as part of this Diamond Jubilee, trying to show the diversity of the UTEP student body. So you will be getting something from us at some point during the school year.

Okay

[END OF TAPE AND INTERVIEW].