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Feliciano Hinojosa

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Chamizal Oral History Project

Feliciano Hinojosa
By Michelle L. Gomilla

March 14, 1994

This is an interview with Feliciano Hinojosa, former President of the Chamizal Civic Organization. The interview, by Michelle Gomilla, is part of the Chamizal Oral History Project. We are located at Mr. Hinojosa's home, 1425 Hawthorne, El Paso, Texas. Today's date is March 14, 1994.

G: Mr. Hinojosa, before we begin discussing your involvement in the Chamizal settlement, I'd like for you to tell us about your early years here in El Paso. Perhaps you can begin by telling us when and where you were born, please.

H: Okay. I was born in El Paso, Texas [at] 1209 South El Paso Street. I went to grammar school at Aoy School, I went into junior high at Bowie Junior High, and I went into Bowie High School.

G: You graduated from Bowie High School?

H: Bowie High School, that's right. And then from there, I went on to Texas Western College.

G: What year did you graduate from Bowie?

H: In 1949. Next month we're having our 45th reunion.

G: My goodness. Are you helping plan the reunion?

H: Yes, I'm on the committee. Usually I'm one of the ones on the committee all the time.

G: Were your parents born here in El Paso?

H: No. My parents were born in Durango, Mexico- both of them.

G: Did they immigrate here to El Paso?

H: They did- in 1910. And from then on, they lived in El Paso all their lives until they died recently. My mom died at ninety-seven and my dad died at eighty-nine.

G: What did you receive your degree in?

H: Business Administration.

G: Did you go to work right after you graduated?

H: No. I went into the service because I [felt that I] needed to go to the service before I started anything else. So I went into the service and I came back. I started working for El Paso Employment Texas Commission. And they interviewed me there. And then, I became an interviewer. I received [news of] an opening from Raytheon Company so I arranged my own interview (chuckles) to go work with that company. And I worked for Raytheon Company thirty-two years.

G: Did you retire with the Raytheon Company?

H: Yes, I did- in 1989.

G: And are you working now?

H: I'm working now with the El Paso Independent School

District. I'm a monitor for the mentally-impaired children. And I guess that brings me up-to-date.

G: Okay. Let's back up to the Chamizal Treaty. Do you remember when [Ambassador] Thomas Mann announced that the Chamizal Treaty had passed?

H: Yes, I sure did. And the reason I got involved in the Chamizal [was] because my dad called me. At that time I had already moved from South El Paso. I lived here [at 1425 Hawthorne]. But he called me and said that somebody had told him that they were going to take their houses away from them and that they were not going to give them enough money for their houses there. And so I went to see what this, you know, Chamizal [was] all about.

G: So you first heard about the Chamizal from your father?

H: From my father.

G: And where was he living at the time?

H: At 1214 South Oregon in El Paso.

G: So he was [living] in the area that was involved in the Chamizal Treaty?

H: Right, very much so. So then, I went to that meeting. And for some reason that I don't know why, immediately we chose officers and I became the President. I don't remember who were the other [elected] officers.

G: Okay. You mention a meeting. Who organized the meeting?

H: Mrs. Elizabeth Bush. And I don't recall the other gentleman. But there was another gentleman. They were the

ones that really organized the meetings.

G: So you went to the meeting because your father expressed some concern about the relocation?

H: Right.

G: And where were the meetings held?

H: The meetings were held at Sacred Heart School. And from then on, we had a meeting every week or whenever it was necessary.

G: And what was the name of the organization?

H: Chamizal Civic Organization.

G: And do you remember the year you were elected President?

H: 1962, I think. I don't remember. It was about that time.

G: Were you the first person elected as President or had the organization been in existence before?

H: No. I was the first elected President. I remember that a Mr. [Oscar B.] White was, like, the Chairperson at the time. But since he was Democrat- and Mrs. Bush and the other gentleman were Republicans- they weren't getting too well along. So that was one of the reasons I became President. Because, to me, it didn't matter whether I was Republican or Democrat. I was doing my civic duty and [in] the interest for my dad.

G: Did your dad attend the meetings?

H: No. He didn't. He said that, well, you know, "Take over." But he didn't attend the meetings at all.

G: Could I ask you to describe the neighborhood in the Chamizal

area? Do you remember any...

H: Yes. Well, I was very fortunate because there were two blocks of private homes. But other than that, there were a lot of tenements and a lot of small- I hate to say- shacks, but that's what they were. They were in a very depressed situation. And what was happening there was that the taxes [were very low]. They were charging them very little taxes.

G: The city government?

H: The city government was charging very little taxes and somebody told them that whatever [the] value of the house [that was recorded] on the tax papers, [that] that's what they were going to give them. That's why everybody became aroused [and asked], "Hey, what's happening to us? They're going to take our houses away from us."

G: Did your father ever tell you how he first heard about the Chamizal Treaty?

H: No, other than he said somebody called him. Somebody called him and I don't recall who [he] said he had heard it from. So he called me here. And that's why I went to see what was the Chamizal all about. But that's the way I got involved with the Chamizal. And...

G: Were all the neighborhoods the same? Were most of the people living there....Were they low-income [families]?

H: Very low-income. Most of them were [receiving] \$300 a month, maybe less. Some were on social security and that's all they were receiving. Others [received] not even social

security. They were dependent on their children. And that was the very dismal part about it.

G: So when you had the meetings, the people that went were the people that were concerned about what was going to happen.

H: Right. Most of them didn't speak English. So, since I was bilingual I [was able to help them]. Immediately Mr. [Joseph F.] Friedkin, [Commissioner, International Boundary and Water Commission, United States Section], said that, yes, he approved of me. Because he had a lot of power as to [the effect that he knew] who was whom and who we were going to meet. And then, soon after, he sort of, kind of, took a liking to me. And then I began speaking Spanish and English and I used to let these people know about the laws. See, they didn't know about the laws in Mexico. They didn't know about the laws in the United States. They just didn't know anything. So that's one of the reasons why I was really with the groups all the time.

G: What was the general tone of the meetings when the group of people were together?

H: [They asked me questions such as], "How much are they going to pay me?" and "Where are we going to be relocated?"

G: So how did you address those questions?

H: Right away. So I found out these people would [not] benefit from the government, you know. There was no legislation for these people. There was only legislation as to the book value or the tax value of the houses. And that [was] what

they were going to give them.

G: And what were the houses like?

H: Some of them were like shacks, some of them were half nice. Some of them, they didn't have any electricity, no running water [and had] outhouses for the bathroom. Other ones were made out of standing adobe and other ones were very nice houses. But you know, it was the [type] of old house where, [for example], you built one room and then you built another room and then you built another room. [It was the type of house] where you could see where they were building one room after the other as they became, I guess, better off.

G: Were there any petitions circulating at the time?

H: No, not that I know of. No. A lot of people were opposed to it because I don't know whether it was they didn't want to give the land back to Mexico or because they were afraid they wouldn't get enough money. And they didn't really know where they were going to be relocated. I think that was the two big questions: "How much are they going to give us?" and "Where are we going to be relocated?"

G: So you were sort of seen as a liaison- a middle person?

H: Yes.

G: And who did you talk to in the city government or what dealings did you have with city officials, federal officials...

H: At that time I spoke to- well, it was Mr. Friedkin and all his department. And then, also, [I spoke to] the mayor of

El Paso and...

G: Judson Williams?

H: Judson Williams. He used to live about three houses away from here.

G: On this same street?

H: Yes.

G: On Hawthorne?

H: On Hawthorne. So...

G: Is he still alive?

H: Yes. So they used to call me. And then some of the people were skeptical of me because I was talking to these people. They wanted to know how come they were talking to me and they trust[ed] me so much. See, they didn't understand that. I made it clear [by saying] that, "I am not going as a Republican, I'm not going as a Democrat, and I'm not going as nothing. I'm just fighting for the interest of my father and, of course, the rest of the people."

G: Do you think, perhaps, there was some suspicion because you weren't living in the neighborhood? You may have been seen as an outsider.

H: No. I think that the reason there was suspicion was because they would say that I was well-off- which I wasn't. I had a good job. Raytheon is a fabulous company. I had a nice home, you know. But I think that was the main reason that they [did] think I was going to sell them out. I think that's what they used to say. But, you know, slowly but

surely I got their confidence. And they pretty well went on what I had to say because there was never a reason for me to lie to them. And I wouldn't. And I know Mr. Friedkin knows that. And I think that's one of the reasons he respects me because, to me, I had a job to do and that was it.

G: So when did you begin your term as President, Mr. Hinojosa?

H: Right away- at the second meeting.

G: And do you remember the year?

H: I think it must have been 1961.

G: 1961?

H: Yes. You know, Mrs. Elizabeth Bush, [who lives] on Echo Street, has all the paper work.

G: Which street?

H: Echo.

G: Could you spell that?

G: E-C-H-O. [Echo Street is in the] northeast [area of El Paso].

H: I don't know whether she passed away or not. But see, she was the Secretary [of the Chamizal Civic Organization] in reality and she kept all the records. And one time I asked her if she would give them to me. And she said, "I don't want to give them to you not for any reason, but because I want to do something with them." I don't think she wanted to keep them. Because she and I became very good friends- and this other man that I don't remember his name. And I wish I could have those records because those records are

the ones [that include] the letters back and forth from Washington, from Mr. Friedkin, from Judson Williams, from Mr. [John F.] Kennedy at the time he was a senator. And she has all those records. And I thought it would be nice if I could keep them but, like I say, I went all over the world and I lost track of her. In fact, I don't know whether she's still alive or not. So she has all the paper work-- all of them.

G: The correspondence...

H: The correspondence and all that, yes.

G: How often did you meet with Commissioner Friedkin?

H: At least twice a month. He, in fact, would come over and would tell us the news as to what was happening and what was going on and...

G: You would go back to the meetings and share [information]?

H: I would go to the meetings and share it with all the people. And see, it was that not only South El Paso [where meetings were held] as per se, but we [also] went to have to go like a little bit east [of] El Paso. [Some meetings were held] right behind Bowie High School. And we had meetings in different parts of the south side [of the] city, you know. And, sometimes, we had a lot of people and sometimes we didn't. Sometimes some people just wanted to come and see what I had to say. Mrs. Bush and I and the other two officers, we always went to all the meetings.

G: And what was the general tone of the meetings?

H: At first, they were very skeptical. Most [of those attending the meetings were] skeptical. Especially when some people would tell them that we were just going to sell them out. They were giving us a bad time. But they found out that it was not true. Afterwards, they would call me and ask me, "When are we going to have another meeting?" And it came to the point where I had to go to Washington for the- what do they call them- before Senator Fulbright.

G: The hearings?

H: The hearings, yes.

G: Could you tell us a little bit about the hearings?

H: Okay. It was funny because I was working for Raytheon and I had to go there for about a week, you know. So...

G: With Raytheon or...

H: With the hearings. And I had never been absent in my life at work. So I didn't really know what to say. So I went over there and I told him that I was going to Washington. He said, "Felix, what are you going to do over there?" You see, they thought I was kidding. So I said, "Well, this and this"- and [I told them] about the Chamizal. And so, I showed them all my paper work and everything. It happens that one of the gentlemen from the Raytheon Company was there and- he's a big shot- he said, "This is the best thing that could ever happen to Raytheon. Give him as much time as he wants to and let him go."

G: Do you remember the name of the gentleman?

H: No, but I can ask. So then, it was a question of [coming up with the money for travel expenses. And I thought], "I have to come up with \$700 or something"- which I didn't have cash to spare, you know. So I told Mr. Friedkin that I was going to get a loan. So he said, "Okay." So when I got the loan, Mr. Friedkin saw that I got reimbursed. Mr. Friedkin, Father Gafford, and then Senator [Ralph] Yarborough, Senator [John] Tower- they reimbursed me.

Anyway, when I went to Washington, [it was my first trip there]. I had never been to Washington before. I've been all over the world, but not Washington. (chuckles)

G: But never to Washington?

H: No. So I didn't know even where to start, you know. So I said, "Well, I'm going to go to the Mexican embassy." I mean, where else could I go, you know?

G: You were alone on the trip?

H: Oh, I was alone on the trip. Well, Mr. Friedkin went with me, [along with] Mr. Charlie Abbott and Mr. Fred Hervey. But they sort of went their way, you know, and I went my way.

G: What did Mr. Abbott do and Mr. Hervey [do]?

H: They also testified in the hearings, you know. But see, I didn't know that I was sort of, like, the star witness. Because I was not a politician and they could not tear me apart like the others. And also, my representative here...

G: Richard White?

H: No. The one before him- and I forgot his name. And he was a good man. Anyway, when I was over there I said, "Well, where am I going to go? I don't know anything about this system." So I went to the Mexican embassy. And then I told them my problem, you know. Right away they were very cooperative. They helped me with the statement I was to present. They put it in paper work. I didn't know I was supposed to give them paper work [that outlined] as to what I was going to tell. And then from there, they told me that if I needed anything they would help me.

G: The Mexican embassy?

H: The Mexican embassy.

G: Do you remember the official in charge there?

H: No. You know, I was a novice in the business of politics that I- especially in Washington- I just said, "Hey, the only thing they could say is no." But they didn't. They were very helpful.

Then, suddenly, a Mr. Rivera called me. And he said, "You know, I am the son of Professor Rivera that used to work for Bowie High School in El Paso." And I said, "Yes. Oh, I know him- Carlos Rivera. Yes, I know him very well." And he said, "Well, okay. Anything you need, you let me know." So he helped me.

So when I went to the hearings, I think I was the third one [who testified.] And they were very nice. They didn't tear me apart. They didn't do anything. I just

presented what I had to say and the thing was over.

G: Can you tell us perhaps the main points you discussed or the main points that you mentioned?

H: The main points were [that] there was no just legislation for the people here in El Paso in the Chamizal. They were not going to receive enough money for their little houses to relocate without having them to pay anything out of their pocket or owing any money. That was the main thing. There was no legislation for that. So, I guess, that served its purpose. And then Mr. Friedkin called me and said, "Oh, Felix"- he was very nice- he said, "You did very well." And I think that he said, "You made it"- but I know that I was just only a little part. We made it. That was what happened over there in Washington.

Then I went over and I visited the White House and Jackie [Kennedy] was there. And they took me to the Senate House and Ted Kennedy was there. And, of course, I didn't meet with the President over there at all. But I did meet [him] here in El Paso before he went to Washington.

G: You met President Kennedy?

H: Kennedy.

G: Did you speak to him?

H: I spoke to him, but it was because Richard White was the one that got me in there. And he was the one that helped me here the most. I think he was going to run for the House of Representatives. And he won.

G: How was Richard White involved in the Chamizal issue? What role did he play?

H: I think that by the time he came in, the Chamizal was already over, yes. At that time he was senator, I think. Since Mr. Richard White knew all the Democrats, he reared me [and showed me] where to go and, really, he was the one that pushed me all the way up to the Hotel Cortéz. [That's] where Senator Kennedy was. And I remember I met [Raymond Telles] in the lobby where we were. It was Mr. Raymond Telles. And he said, "When you talk to Mr. Kennedy, tell him that the people of El Paso would like for me to be ambassador to Mexico." And I said, "I sure will." And I'm sorry to say that I didn't because I was [so] involved with the Chamizal that- we were talking of the Chamizal- and [I was] all nervous that I...

G: [You were] overwhelmed?

H: ...[was] overwhelmed and that I didn't [tell Kennedy about the request of Telles]. And I don't mind doing publicly because that's the truth. I did not say anything about Mr. Telles. Not because I didn't want to, I just...

G: Forgot?

H: ...forgot. So it was very nice. It opened many doors for me. It opened a lot of doors at work here in El Paso. And I got job offers all over.

G: So what happened when you came back to El Paso?

H: When I came back to El Paso, Mr. Friedkin said, "Felix, all

we have to do now is sit and wait." And that's what we did. And you know why I think that? The Kennedy assassination overshadowed everything and the Chamizal became like a second or third [issue], or whatever, you know. They didn't mention the Chamizal anymore until we heard it in the newspapers that they had made legislation for all the people in El Paso and that we had got what we had asked for.

G: So when did the government officials, or should I say appraisers, begin appraising the home sites?

H: Immediately after we came from Washington, like probably in [19]62 or [19]63. Yes, they started doing the appraising [at this time].

G: What did the appraisal process involve? Do you remember when they went to your father's home?

H: Yes. What they looked for is, like, how many kitchens do you have and how many bathrooms do you have? So if you had two kitchens and two bathrooms they would call it a duplex and you would get a little bit more money.

G: And if you had no bathroom or no kitchen?

H: They would just say, you know, it's a complex. They would give them \$8,000 or so.

G: Were the people given any type of information on, perhaps, where they could move to? Or were there any types of housing areas built especially to house these people?

H: No, but a lot of them moved to northeast El Paso because there were so many houses being built over there. They

moved that way. And a lot of them moved here in this area south of Yandell Street. A lot of them moved over there. The only ones that really were- I felt sorry for them- were the elderly people. They didn't want to move because, see, they didn't have any transportation. They didn't know how to speak English and they just didn't want to move. I think those were the ones that gave us a little bit more trouble, but they all moved.

G: How long did it take before the appraisal process was completed? Because, if I'm not mistaken, they went parcel by parcel.

H: Let's see. It took them a good, I say, a good seven, eight, ten years.

G: Before everyone was relocated?

H: Before everyone was relocated.

G: So when the house was appraised by the appraiser, how long did the people have before they had to move?

H: I think they had three months. Because that's what my dad had. And see, what they did, the government would go and move you or somebody that was contracted, [such as] some transfer company, they'd go and move you and move everything.

G: And who would pay the moving expenses?

H: The government did. The government paid all the moving expenses, yes. Most people were very happy. There were some that weren't. Of course, some were fighting the

Chamizal land. They didn't want to give it back to Mexico and [some did not], really, [want to give up] their homes or....[Some were concerned about] their relocation or the money that they gave them. They just didn't want this piece of land to go to Mexico.

G: How long was it before they received the money for their home once it was appraised?

H: My dad received the money about thirty days afterwards.

G: Do you remember how much he received for his house?

H: Yes. You want me to say?

G: Sure.

H: I think it was \$13[,000] or \$14,000.

G: And the home that he bought with that money, was it the same or was it...?

H: No. What he did was he came to live here with me and I made an apartment for him. So he just never....Well, he was in his 80's. And I'd rather that I would take care of him and my mom. So they came here to live with me. My wife was agreeable so I said, "Hey, if she's agreeable, that's okay with me."

G: And what happened to the homes that the government bought?

H: Oh, they demolished them.

G: All of them?

H: Most of them they did [demolish], yes. They demolished them, especially where we were. That's where the new bridge is.

G: Which bridge?

H: The Stanton Bridge. That's where we used to live. We used to live on Oregon. And it's Mesa and then Stanton. It's between both bridges- Santa Fe and Stanton.

G: Were there any commercial buildings involved that were forced to relocate?

H: Yes, there were. And there were some buildings, like Navarro [Elementary] School, [that] went to Mexico. And there was a new immigration building that went to Mexico.

G: Did the Mexican government pay for those buildings?

H: Yes, they did pay for all of those structures.

G: Let's go back to your Washington trip. When you came back to El Paso, you talked to the people and told them exactly what was going to happen?

H: Yes, we had meetings and then we told them that now we have to sit, wait, and pray that this legislation would pass. The thing was that they'd call every day. I said, "No, I don't have any information. It has to come in the newspaper." And when it did, I called everybody. We...

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

H: No, I don't, but it- [the Chamizal Civic Organization]- disbanded afterwards. Well, after President Lyndon Johnson and President López Mateos came to El Paso and they had the big ceremony. After that, the organization disbanded because nobody ever wanted to meet again, you know. So that was it.

The celebration was very nice. I met President Lyndon Johnson there and he came and shook my hand. Too bad that they didn't take a picture. (chuckles) And I met President López Mateos and a lot of dignitaries that I didn't know who they were. But it was nice. My wife and I attended.

After that, there were a lot of local interviews from television and radio. And a lot of people asked me to come and work for them, especially the banks because they wanted all of these people to bring their money to that particular bank. It was kind of nice afterwards.

G: Would you like to add anything else about your involvement in the Chamizal settlement, Mr. Hinojosa?

H: Well, the only regret I have is that they....I feel like they never gave me any credit for it because as Mr. Friedkin knows and Judson Williams knows, I did a lot of work for them. I never received any- that I say- any proper credit like a thank-you from the local people. And Mr. Friedkin

brought me a little memento from the Chamizal.

G: Do you still have that memento?

H: Yes.

G: Perhaps we can see it later.

H: Sure. And that was it. But, like I said, I think it was because the Kennedy assassination took over everything. And I guess that was why I was happy that you wanted to interview me because I think this is the first time, even if it's thirty years after, that somebody was really interested in knowing what I did- because I would like my children [and] grandchildren to know that I did something in this world while I was here. And I think that after that the Chamizal was over.

G: Okay. Well, I'd like to thank you for the time...

H: You're welcome.

G: ...that you've spent talking to me, Mr. Hinojosa, and if you have anything else to add you can always contact us later. But I'm very, very appreciative.

H: You're welcome.

G: Thank you. This is the end of the interview.

H: Thank you.

End of Interview