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Interview no. 846

William E. Wood

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Institute of Oral History
The University of Texas at El Paso
Chamizal Oral History Project

Name of Person Interviewed:	William E. Wood
Name of Interviewer:	Michelle L. Gomilla
Date of Interview:	March 21, 1994
Length of Interview:	1 Hour
Length of Transcript:	32 Pages

Biographical Synopsis

Former U.S. government real estate appraiser during Chamizal settlement; born in El Paso, Texas, March 20, 1929; reared in Kern Place area; mother graduated as Registered Nurse from Hotel Dieu School of Nursing, 1927; father was a fireman in El Paso Fire Department and retired as a Fire Chief; attended Dudley Grade School and El Paso High School; employed by Pacific Fruit Express during high school and college; graduated from Texas Western College in 1952 with Bachelor of Arts degree in Government; attended University of Texas Law School in Austin, Texas; employed by Atomic Energy Commission in Mercury, Nevada, 1954-1955; worked in Right-of-Way Department with El Paso Natural Gas Company; real estate salesman with Rollo Gurss' business, Town and Country Real Estate; regional trustee for Safeway Stores; owner of commercial real estate business since 1959.

Summary of Interview

Recalls early years in El Paso, Texas; schools attended; recollects experience icing railroad cars as employee of Pacific Fruit Express; handling legal documents on leased equipment for Atomic Energy Commission at Mercury, Nevada test site; termination from Right-of-Way Department of El Paso Natural Gas; decision to sell commercial real estate; chance encounter in parking lot of downtown El Paso Safeway Store that led to future success; renders account of meeting and subsequent hiring by Dale Faulkner, head of real estate for Safeway Stores; experience as regional trustee for Safeway

Stores; describes real estate appraisal courses taken to become qualified appraiser for federal government during Chamizal relocation and settlement; mentions counterpart Robin E.L. Washington; detailed description of Chamizal homes; provides colorful vignettes of home appraisals in Chamizal area; comments on financial situation of Chamizal residents; description of Chamizal area homes; remarks on absence of mortgages on Chamizal homes; patronization of Union Furniture Company and American Furniture Company by Chamizal residents; absence of gangs, crime, and graffiti in South El Paso; mistrust of banks by Chamizal residents; use of words such as *cholo*, Chicano, Mexican-American, Hispanic; payment error made by U.S. government during Chamizal relocation; donation of files to Chamizal National Memorial; sentiments of relocated Chamizal residents.

Chamizal Oral History Project

William E. Wood, Jr.
By Michelle L. Gomilla

March 21, 1994

This is an interview with W.E. Wood, former government real estate appraiser during the Chamizal settlement. The interview, conducted by Michelle Gomilla, is part of the Chamizal Oral History Project. We are located at the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso. Today's date is the 21st of March, 1994.

G: Before we start discussing your involvement in the Chamizal settlement, Mr. Wood, I'd like for you to share with us some background information. Perhaps you can begin by telling us when and where you were born, please.

W: My name is William E. Wood, Jr. and I was born in El Paso, Texas on March 20, 1929. And I have just turned sixty-five as of yesterday.

G: Happy belated birthday.

W: Well, thank you. And I was born in the old Hotel Dieu Hospital here. My mother was a registered R.N. nurse and a graduate of the Hotel Dieu School of Nursing. [She graduated] in approximately 1927. My father was a fireman in the El Paso

Fire Department and retired as a Fire Chief. And I have four sisters and one brother. And I was born and raised in the Kern Place area of El Paso between Kern Place and Rim Road down in the ditch- in the gully- on a street called New York. Six hundred seven New York Street was where I was brought up. And I went to Dudley Grade School and El Paso High School and graduated from Texas Western College. When I started it was called Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy and the name was changed in my junior or senior year to Texas Western. We had the option of taking our degrees either reading, "Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy" or "Texas Western." So I chose "Texas Western." My degree reads, "Texas Western." I graduated in 1952 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Government, which is now called Political Science here at the University. And...

G: What did you do after you graduated from college?

W: Well, to go back before that, I worked my way through high school and college working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, from seven at night until seven in the morning for the Pacific Fruit Express icing railroad cars, which was a heavy duty, hard labor type of a job. And we were paid thirty-five cents an hour. And that's how I went through the College of Mines at Texas Western and El Paso High School. [It] was with that job.

And after I got out of college, I went to the University of Texas Law School in Austin, Texas for one year.

And my grades were not very good and I had to work. And I just couldn't devote what I needed. And it was not in my blood to be a lawyer. And so I gave that up and came back to El Paso and worked for El Paso Natural Gas Company for approximately one year.

G: What did you do with the El Paso Natural Gas Company?

W: I was in their Right-of-Way Department doing right-of-way type of work. But before that- I'm getting ahead of myself- before that I had a very interesting job for a year with the Atomic Energy Commission at the Nevada test site which I call Mercury, Nevada, outside of Las Vegas. And that was the years 1954 to [19]55, I believe. It was called the Tea Pot Series. And I had a very wonderful job. I witnessed fourteen atomic devices set off. [I was an] eyewitness. My job was to handle all the legal documents on all the equipment on the Nevada test site. [The equipment] was leased. And when the shots were over then, we would return all the equipment back to the owners. And the United States Government did not own anything. They leased everything. For example, they would lease 500 pickups and 1,000 sedans, and tractors, and huge pieces of equipment- all the way down to hammers and screwdrivers. Everything was leased. And it was my job to keep track of all that. And I was paid well and got quite a bit of radiation. The thing was, none of us ever thought anything about it. And I'm still alive and healthy. So there's nothing wrong with me, I don't think.

And then I came back to El Paso, went to work for El Paso Natural Gas Company in the Right-of-Way Department. And that was the only job I was ever fired from.

G: You were fired?

W: I was fired.

G: What happened?

W: Well, I was too young and brash and didn't know any different but [I was told] you should never rock the boat as a young boy coming up in the corporate world. In the Right-of-Way Department my job was rather easy. So [I] started asking everybody else how they did their job. And pretty soon, I learned everybody's job in the whole Department without any time at all. And, evidently, (chuckles) that upset one of the Superintendents in the Department. And I was called in and told I had a new job. And I thought, "That's nice. Maybe I'm getting ahead in life." And he said, "Your new job is to take care of the files in the basement of this building." And I didn't quite understand. I thought he was joking and I started laughing. I said, "Oh, come on Grover. You're joking." He said, "No, I'm not joking. That's your job and we feel that you're qualified to handle that." And I said, "Well, yes. I think that's probably right." I said, "But I don't believe I have the qualifications to handle that job." And he said, "Well, then, in that case, you're terminated immediately as of once. And please leave immediately." And I said, "Thank you very much," and I left. And as a

consequence, that's the best thing that's ever happened to me because I went on in life to rather nice things. And so, that was a stepping stone to my success...was being fired from my job.

Then- what else do you want to ask me in my beginning years?

G: You're doing fine. How did you get into the real estate business?

W: After I was fired, I think I had about \$30 in my pocket.

G: Were you married by then?

W: No, I was a bachelor and I didn't know what in the hell I was going to do. So I walked into a bar and ordered a beer.

G: Do you remember the name of the bar?

W: It was downtown across from the present day Post Office. And I forgot the name of the bar, but there was a bar there. At eleven o'clock in the morning I had a beer on the day I was fired. And I was thinking, "Now, what's going to happen?"

And so I left the bar and [as] I was walking towards the downtown parking, I ran into a friend. He was a real estate man who owned a real estate company here and he asked me what I was doing. And I said, "Well, I just got fired." And he said, "Why don't you come and sell real estate for me?" And I said, "Sell real estate?" I said, "What's that? I've never heard of that before." And he explained it to me. And I thought, "Well, okay. I'll give it a try." And so, as a result of that chance meeting on the street, I went to work

for this man. And it was called Town and Country Real Estate at the time. The man's name was Rollo Gurss.

G: Could you spell that?

W: Rollo Gurss. R-o-l-l-o G-u-r-s-s. Rollo Gurss. And he was a Kappa Sigma Fraternity brother of mine also. And so I went to work as a real estate salesman.

G: Back then did you have to be licensed or take any tests to...

W: Back in that day and time, all you had to do was send in \$15 or \$25 and you got a license. And then, when I became a broker two years later, then I was in the first group that had to take a broker's exam. And I had to take a broker's exam. And that was 1958. I took the exam in [19]58 [and] started my own business in January of 1959.

I started out selling resale houses and a couple of new houses and promptly went broke- and stayed broke- for the next four years because the economy in the United States and El Paso and everywhere was a downer. And that's when President John Kennedy ran for the presidency on the premise that to get the economy back, he was going to send a man to the moon and return everybody's income tax back to them. And he did. He wanted to send a man to the moon [and] in 1960 everybody got their income tax back in the United States. To get the economy going....

El Paso's economy was a disaster and we couldn't sell houses and couldn't give them away. Houses were going for nothing down and [you could] assume the loan and [there was]

no qualifying of any kind. And that was one way to get a house. The next problem was you had to have a job good enough to pay the \$125 a month payment. So a lot of people couldn't afford that. And it was a tough time in my early days. So I decided to get into commercial real estate. I thought there would be better opportunity there. The commissions were bigger. The sales prices were larger. So I got into commercial real estate.

And my big break in life came as a chance encounter. One day I was walking from my apartment to my little office- I was so broke I didn't even have a car- and I walked past this Safeway store located at El Paso and Prospect [Streets]. It's now where the Sun West Motor Bank drive-in is [in] downtown El Paso. There was a Safeway store there. Half the property was the building. The other half was the parking. They had parking for about ten, fifteen cars. As I walked past, [I noticed] there were these two ladies having an argument over the parking space. Both of them [had] tried to get in at the same time. And so the store manager was out there with his apron rolled up around him and offering to pull out one lady's car and park the other one. And so I was standing there and I asked the Safeway manager, I said, "Well, can I help you?" And he said, "Yes, if you'll park this lady's car over there, I'll park this lady's car here." And I said, "Fine." And so I got it. I parked the car. And I left and I kept walking to my office. And I did not think anything about that at the

time.

And about a week later it dawned on me. [I thought], "By God, that store needs parking." And so I checked out the property next to that store to see if it was for sale. And it was. So I got all the information that was necessary to make a real estate sale. And then for some reason, I decided to check out all the rest of the Safeway stores in El Paso, Texas on my own. And I did the same thing.

And [I] caught the bus [and] rode out to the main office of Safeway, which was on Montana Street across from Dick Poe Motor Company. And I walked in- unannounced- and asked to see the man in charge of real estate for Safeway Stores. And they ushered me back to a man by the name of Dale Faulkner. Unbeknownst to me, Mr. Faulkner had just been sent to El Paso, Texas from Oakland, California- the main offices of Safeway Stores- to take care of the very situation that I witnessed and to expand the chain in El Paso into bigger stores, and bigger locations, and more locations. And [the new Safeway Stores were planned to be] three and four times the size of those small stores. So I told him the story of the two ladies. And then I put on his desk all the information of that location, plus all the rest of them. And Mr. Faulkner looked at me astounded. He said, "Who told you to do something like that?" I said, "No one." He said, "Why'd you do it?" I said, "Trying to make a sale. Trying to make a commission so I can pay my rent, lights, water, gas and

groceries." And I said, "It's the only way I know how to make a living. That's how we do it in commercial [real estate]." He said, "Well, I'll be damned! That's what I was sent to El Paso to do and you just did it for me. Now, you're my man. You're the man I've been looking for. You come back and see me tomorrow." And I said, "Okay, I will."

So I went back. And the next day Mr. Faulkner told me, he said, "Well, you seem to be well-known in El Paso. I've checked up on you overnight." (chuckles) And he said, "There's quite a few people out here that know you. There's a couple of them that went to school with you. Your credit's not very good." And I said, "Well, that's true. It's pretty bad. When you're broke, you're broke." And he started laughing. And he said, "Well, that's the way I started, too. So you and I, we got plenty in common. If you will work for Safeway Stores- and not our competition- we will give you all the work that we can give."

G: Who was their competition?

W: They really didn't have any competition. They had a Food Mart and a Furr's at the time and a bunch of small stores. But there was really no competition except the Furr's and the Food Marts. And they were not in the same league and caliber as Safeway. They were small, regional chains. Safeway is a national chain, a very wealthy chain.

And so, he told me that all the sites that we had to work on would be in the strictest of confidence and that I

would be paid only the commission on the stores that were successful. And [he also told me that] all the work on the stores that were not successful was part of the deal and I had to pay for it. Safeway would not pay for anything, but if I would take it on as a commission, that I would be able to do quite well. And, of course, I immediately agreed. And, as a result, over the years I did twenty-one Safeway Stores. And I was the trustee for Safeway in this part of the country. And I would operate as William E. Wood, Jr., Trustee, on all contracts where the name Safeway would not be disclosed. Because if the name Safeway ever became disclosed in the negotiations of large tracts of property with five, ten, fifteen different owners, why, we would lose the project because of human greed. And [as a result], the price would triple, quadruple on us and then some people would just flat out would not sell. And so the whole thing would be a disaster in the washout. So we had to work under secrecy. And I had to work as William E. Wood, Jr., Trustee.

And [as for] the stores that were failures, I worked harder on those stores than the ones that were successes. But it was a wonderful relationship that I had. It's what got me started in this business and [helped me become] successful in commercial real estate. I also wound up owning several properties. And I still do. Which, by the way, if I had stayed with El Paso Natural Gas Company I never would have been able to own anything. I would still be salaried or been

fired a long time ago without anything or let go like they did with all their good employees. They let them go because they downsized the company. I would have been like that.

But getting back to the Chamizal now. The Chamizal, when it was announced [by the U.S. government, I heard that] they needed appraisers. I happened to have known Joe [Joseph F.] Friedkin personally. And he was an ambassador. With his title he was of the ambassador rank. He was the head of the International Boundary and Water Commission, U.S. Section, with the rank of ambassador. And I applied for an appraiser job.

G: Did he call you personally?

W: No, I applied for the job.

G: So it was announced that they needed [appraisers]?

W: Yes, it was announced. And so they were going to get qualified appraisers. Well...

G: Define qualified.

W: Now, the word qualified....There weren't too many of us qualified. So I took two courses in real estate appraising- Course One and Course Two of the American Institute of Real Estate Appraisers- one at University of Missouri and one at Southern Methodist University. They were two week-long courses. [Although] they were taught at the universities, they were not university-sponsored courses. But that's where they were held. And those were very good investments on my part. And they taught me more of my business than I ever knew

about. [They] also taught me, told me, showed me, that if I ever wanted to get ahead in life, being a real estate appraiser was not the way to do it. But being a real estate appraiser certainly is a wonderful education into the workings of real estate, especially commercial [real estate]. So anyhow, I got a job.

G: So you took the courses after you were accepted?

W: Yes. Well, right before I was accepted. And it was a very large project. The Chamizal was a big project. And I was assigned to appraise houses. I did some commercial but I did that on a fee basis for individuals who were going against the United States government in the condemnation proceedings and process. I was with the United States and being paid by the United States Treasury Department. And so, I was a government appraiser in that respect. We were paid \$35 an appraisal and everybody....In this day and time, you might not think that's a lot of money but...

G: Back then that was a lot.

W: ...back then it was plenty good or else we wouldn't have taken it on.

G: Were you familiar with the Chamizal area before you accepted the position?

W: Well, I've known about it all my life and studied the Chamizal with Dr. Gregory in the Government Department at the College of Mines. And I was thoroughly versed in the Chamizal-everything.

G: Could you describe the neighborhood?

W: The Chamizal was a large area. It was not a neighborhood. It was a large area which had many neighborhoods in it. [Of the] several areas that I worked in, [for example], one was called the Rio Linda Addition, which was down on 13th Street in South El Paso. And we did all of those. I did all of those houses. The government had two appraisals made on each house. And my counterpart was named Robin E.L. Washington. He was a retired Army Colonel and he is very prominent in the black community of El Paso. And he was my counterpart. Both of us would make an appraisal of the same house. And we wound up doing all of these residential houses there and then the different subdivisions. A lot of them I can't recall their names. But I have turned over all my files to the United States Parks Department.

G: Yes.

W: Chamizal Memorial.

G: Yes.

W: And, to my astonishment, I'm the only one that saved any files.

G: Which is wonderful.

W: I'm astounded. But anyway, we did hundreds of houses.

G: Were you given a certain time frame to appraise all of these residences or was it an open deadline?

W: No. We were given the assignment. You were to appraise all the houses on this block. And they had them numbered like P-

10, P-11, 12, 13, or whatever number. It was put. And then we would measure the houses. We would personally measure everything and we would document it, put it down in a report, diagram it, fill in blanks on everything about the property: the fences, and the sidewalks, and the house, and the condition, and the bedrooms. It's just like the appraisal on a house today.

G: What were the houses like?

W: Most of these houses were humble. They were humble houses. They were not cardboard shacks. They were well-built [and] probably cost new around \$5,000 [or] \$6,000 new after World War II. They were little houses in the 900 [and] 800 square foot range, most of them. Some of them would be up around 1,200 to 1,500 square feet. Those were the bigger ones. The houses were extremely neat [and] well-kept. Pride of ownership was extremely evident. These people had very humble jobs in El Paso.

But it was the Mexican ethnic background of these people that they would band together. For example, we'll take one family that I knew about. I can't recall the name. The father came from Mexico during the Pancho Villa Revolution. [He] came to El Paso and got a job and bought a lot and built his house on the lot. And he had his children [and] raised his children. And the daughter would get married. And usually the husband was a laborer and didn't have much money. So the father would build the daughter's house in the

backyard. And so, now, you have two houses on this lot. Then another daughter would grow up and get married and the father would build another house in the backyard across from the other house. Now we have three houses on the lot- nice houses, by the way.

G: What were they constructed of?

W: Oh, usually brick and adobe, stucco, and everything. But they were well-built. And so now, on this one lot we had three houses. And then, for some reason- whatever happened- the original house was enlarged into the backyard up against the other two houses. And we now had an addition on to the original house and this thing. The entire lot was 50 feet by 120 feet deep and we had three houses. To appraise something like that....[It] was the first time it'd ever happened around this town. [We had] to figure out [how] these people were going to be justly compensated under the laws of the United States under due process procedures of condemnation where you cannot take a person's property without just compensation. Well, you have a house. Except the house is on the back lot of another house. So what I did was simply just appraise the house as if it was by itself on a lot. And so we would appraise the improvements of all three houses and then we would just simply add in the value of the lot to each one of those houses. And that solved the problem. If people didn't like it, the federal court Judge Gwinn, the federal judge here and...

G: What was his name?

W: Judge Gwinn. In almost every instance, was a smart federal judge. And he would give the benefit of the doubt in every instance to the landowner- not the United States government- the theory being that these people did not put their houses up for sale [but] that it was taken from them. So they got the benefit of the doubt in all cases in the federal courts.

G: How did they receive notice that you would go to their home to appraise?

W: We would go to the door [and] knock on the door. We had identification with us. The people had already been told that their houses were being condemned and they were to cooperate with the United States appraisers. All people were informed of that.

G: How were they informed?

W: They were informed by mail, letters, pamphlets, newspaper- everything. They were completely informed. There was no doubt about where the boundaries were. We did not run into too many problems. I would get most of my work done on Saturdays and Sundays when the husband was at home. But I tried to get a lot of it done during the weekdays. But [on] Saturday and Sunday we really had to work hard because that's when the husbands were home. And a lot of the wives wouldn't let us in until the husband got there.

G: Why is that?

W: They just wouldn't let us in, which is okay. That's fine

and...

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

W: There's one case that I can recall where this lady had a very nice home, better than the rest of them in the neighborhood, bigger, with iron fences around it, and a mean, big German police dog in the yard.

G: Back then you didn't have mace.

W: So we told the lady to put the dog in the house while we did the work outside. When we went to go inside she was [told] to put the dog outside. And she did not want to do that. And she was not going to let us in. And she couldn't speak English.

G: Do you speak Spanish?

W: Yes, enough to get by. And she told Robin Washington and me that she was not going to give her house "...to those goddam Mexicans in Mexico." And [she also said] that "They can go to hell and I'm going to keep my house. And I will get my guns out and I will fight." This is fairly common in condemnation proceedings when people are very attached to their properties. You can run into this type of a thing. So we got the officials of the International Boundary and Water Commission and they went over there and had a little talk with the lady.

The lady had two grown children. [Both were] highly educated school teachers in El Paso. And they had to explain to their mother the situation. She finally relented and let us appraise the house. I was always afraid that she was going to turn the dog loose on us but we finally got that house appraised. In the final result- that poor lady- she still would not give her house up. And the day when it came [time] to move, the United States Marshals picked her up bodily and put her in a car and drove her off, put her money into trust in the United States District Court, and put her furniture in storage and she was paid. And I never knew whatever happened to that lady in that family after that. That was one case that I recall.

G: Do you remember her name?

W: No, I don't. It's in those files, however, that I gave everybody. It's in there somewhere.

Then another case which was quite interesting. These people in South El Paso were in pretty good shape financially. I had always heard- being born and raised in El Paso- that how much everybody felt sorry for all those poor Mexicans in South El Paso. And when I got to appraising down here, I found out that there's nothing poor about the poor Mexicans in South El Paso. They're richer than the people that live in Kern Place and Rim Road and Mission Hills- the new neighborhoods of El Paso. And all their houses were free and clear and paid for and....Because during hard times when these people would lose

their jobs, they could not lose their houses. They understood that financial premise very clearly. And they also had three, and four, and five members of the same family living in the same house or on the same lot. And they would band together. And that's how they would keep from starving. They'd always have enough money for groceries, always paid their bills, and they were in very good shape.

Come to find out, also, that one of the most successful furniture and appliance stores in the entire United States was on south Stanton Street. It was called Union Furniture. Union Furniture, at that day and time, sold more furniture and appliances for \$5 down and \$5 a month than anyone in the entire country- in the United States.

G: It's amazing.

W: It's amazing. Most of the people in South El Paso had perfect credit with Union Furniture Company. Very rarely did they ever have to go back and repossess anything. The man that owned the Union Furniture Company just made nothing but a fortune from these people but...

G: Do you remember his name?

W: J.B. Blaugrund. He owned the American Furniture Company here, and the man by the name of Kleinfeld- Saul Kleinfeld- was owner and a manager. These were very successful stores and these people [in South El Paso] were their people.

I had also always heard that South El Paso was a dangerous place and there were gangs. Well, the gangs at that

day and time were not like the gangs of this day and time. It was perfectly safe to walk the streets of South El Paso at any time of the day or the night in the early [19]60's. There was absolutely no crime, whatsoever, as we know it today. Graffiti- the word was not even coined. At that day and time we didn't know what graffiti was or painting on walls. Drive-by shootings simply wasn't even thought of, not even in the movies. There was no such a thing as a drive-by shooting in the entire United States or in the whole world. And so, we did not have these things down there. So it was a safe neighborhood.

And most of the people were hardworking people and they were just trying to get ahead in life and they had all their houses paid for, [at least] most of them that I knew of. I would ask them how much they owed on their mortgage and they'd say, "None." Most of the furniture in the houses was very nice furniture, all from Union Furniture Company- not all of it, but just about. The idea that I had been told all my life- being born and raised in the Kern Place area- that people in South El Paso were poor was false. So I learned that lesson pretty quick.

The people down there did not [all trust the bank]. Half of them would trust the bank and the other half of them would not trust the bank. They would cash their paychecks for cash and they would save it at home or some of them would put it in the bank. Most of them did not have checking accounts

and they would use money orders. They still do that today to pay their bills.

So anyway, on this one particular house- to bring up that point, to highlight that point that I was talking about not having checking accounts, and stuff like that, and cash and....This one house, I went into and appraised it and there was a pipe coming up out of the floor in the bedroom. And I asked the lady what the pipe was for: "How come the pipe stopped halfway up? And what happened here? Were you going to put a bathroom here or something and just stopped?" And she said she just didn't know what that was for and that I would have to talk to her husband. And I thought that was strange. So on Saturday, I went back to that house and I asked the husband a few other questions. And I said, "By the way, what is the pipe in the closet for?" And I said, "This house is going to be condemned and it's going to be torn down." And he said, "Well, I don't know what to tell you what to do." He said, "That's our savings bank. We drop all the money down the tube and there's a trunk. And it goes into a trunk and it's concreted in."

G: And that was their bank?

W: That was their savings bank. So I said, "Well, okay." I informed the Project Manager of the Chamizal about this house.

G: Who was the Project Manager?

W: Well, this man's name was Neimier. [He was] one of them. There were several of them. This particular man- I told you

his name was Neimier- [was a] pretty good man.

G: Could you spell that?

W: N-e-i-m-i-e-r- something like that- Neimier. And so, he sent a United States Marshall over there to this house. And I was not there present or anything, but I had heard later that when they got through jack hammering the floor up- with plenty of witnesses around- they lifted out this trunk that was just loaded with coins of all types, paper money, and everything. It was quite heavy. It took several people to lift it, put it on a truck, take it down to the State National Bank, and count the stuff. And then, come to find out, [bank officials discovered] that some of the pennies were of value, the nickels of value, and dimes [of value]. And so then, they had to start going through them one at a time. And some of the coins were rare and nobody knew about it, but they were common at one time and became rare later. So they had to go through that procedure. And there was quite a bit of money there- how much, I don't know. I never followed that case, but that was one of our houses which stresses the point of these people saving their money in their homes and not trusting a bank. That's why they also grouped together so as to have safety and protection in case of hard times if they were to lose their jobs. [They also grouped together so] that everybody in the family would at least have \$5 a week in their pocket. And that would be plenty to buy groceries for everybody and pay the lights, water, and the gas. And all the houses were paid

for so they didn't have to worry about that [and fear] getting behind in payments and have their houses taken away from them. This was one of the very, very things that these Mexican people understood.

G: Did they band together...

W: At that day and time the word Chicano was never heard of. If you used to call a person a Chicano that was an insult. And he'd slug you and beat you up or threaten to beat you up. You never used that word. Most of them said, "We are Americans. You son-of-a-bitch, you call me American. Don't you ever call me a Mexican or a Chicano or a *cholo*. I'm an American." Now, it's just the opposite. They don't want to be called American. They want to be called *cholos*, Mexican-Americans, Hispanics and- what's some of the other names? So things have changed quite a bit since then in that score because these neighborhoods were 100 percent Mexican. When I say Mexican, they were American citizens- everyone of these people. At least I think they were. I'm sure there were some Mexican citizens there anyway, but most of them were Mexican citizens who came to the United States and became American citizens. And most of them referred to themselves as American- not Mexican- in that day and time. All this Hispanic stuff and Latin stuff and Chicano stuff, and everything, came many years later but, at that day and time, they demanded that they be addressed as an American.

It took us several years to do that project. And

everything went smooth. And when the job was over, why, I went on to more Safeway stores and bigger successes in life. And, for some reason, I saved my files. I don't know why I did, but I did. I always knew that the Chamizal was a historical event, especially from my study of the Chamizal at the College of Mines with Dr. Gregory in the Government Department. And I had a thorough understanding of the Chamizal because of my college education. And so, I kept the files.

And then, I closed my office a month ago and I didn't know what to do with these files. And, somehow, I just got lucky. And I was looking in the phone book and I saw the "Chamizal Project" in the phone book. So I called down there and I asked to speak to somebody and they gave me a boy's name by the name of [Richard Michael] Quijano. I happen to know all his family. The Quijanos are very prominent in El Paso, Texas. The Quijano family is very prominent. He was dumbstruck that I had files. And I said, "Well, the Boundary Commission's got to have the files of everything unless they've thrown them away." He said, "Well, there's a little problem between the Boundary Commission and the Parks Department." He said, "And they won't cooperate with us and we can't get their files even if they have them." I thought, "Well, that's strange." I said, "Well, okay. I'm going to give you my files if they're any good. I don't think they're any good any more, but if you want them you can have them."

He said, "Yes. We're trying to do a history." And he said, "And you actually show the house, and the name of the person that lived there and owned the house, and what the house looked like, and what the car parked in front looked like, and what the kids looked liked waving at you." I used to love to take pictures of the kids out in front of the house waving at me when I'd take a picture of the house. I loved that. In fact, I think my picture's in there a couple of times with the people. [Sometimes] they said, "You can stand here and take a picture." So I'd take a picture and I'd give them pictures. So we had a lot of fun.

G: How did most of the people feel about leaving their homes?

W: It was mixed. Half of them upgraded themselves and the other half were pretty bitter about it, especially the ones that had the nice homes. And then the ones that didn't have really the nicest homes were paid more money for those houses than they could ever have gotten on the resale market. So that was a good chance for them to take cash and upgrade themselves into better homes, which ninety percent did. There's a few that squandered it but most of them...

G: Was there any help available for the people that were forced to relocate? In other words, were there real estate agents...

W: Yes, there was a lot of help. There was government help. There was moving expenses [that] were paid for these people. And they got a lot of perks. They really did. Of course, every real estate agent in town [was] down there trying to

sell them a house because that's how they make a commission. So you had every real estate agent in El Paso down there hawking these people to sell them another house somewhere in the city. So it got El Paso going pretty good. It started getting some money in circulation in El Paso, this project did, for sure.

G: Where did most of the people move to?

W: Most of them moved to the lower valley and the old Government Hill area. [These were the areas] where most of them moved into that I recall.

G: How long did it take you to do an appraisal of a home?

W: Oh, it'd take me about one day to inspect, and draw it up, and everything, and one day of paper work in the office.

G: For each home?

W: For each home. And about three or four hours for a girl to type it. I had a girl that typed everything for me. And it'd take about two and a half days to do a house. If it was a rush job, I could get it done in a day.

G: And who would you submit that paper work to?

W: Then it would be turned into the Project Manager, Mr. Neimeir, at the Chamizal. Then they would issue me a what they would call a voucher, a paper, [or] something, that I had to sign it. And that would be my fee for doing that house. If I made any mistakes on the appraisal, of course, they would bring it to my attention and I'd have to do it over.

G: Did you make many mistakes?

W: Oh, lots of them, lots of them. So we just went right through the project and got it done. And it was a large project.

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

W: You know, I don't know. That was not my duty. I would assume that it would probably take them no more [than] two, three months, [or] thereafter, to be completely paid off. It wouldn't take long.

G: What happened to the homes? Were they all torn down?

W: Demolished. Everything was demolished.

G: From my understanding, there were several commercial buildings located in the Chamizal area.

W: Oh, lots of them, lots.

G: Did you appraise any of those or...

W: Yes, I appraised some commercials, but that was after the appraisals I did for the government. And then later, [I] appraised some commercials for the land owners- the property owners. In the appraisal business and in the appraisal process it is not a conflict of interest to appraise for the United States and then to take on an appraisal for an owner against the government. That is not a conflict of interest because value is value, regardless of whether it's to the government or to the land owner. And if a man's house is worth \$10,000 to the government, it's also worth \$10,000 to

the owner. [The] appraiser, he should come out with the same price. So what's the difference?

And so, anyway, I did two rather large commercials and there was a huge discrepancy between the government appraisers and what I came up with. And I was, in all cases, working through attorneys- not with the owners but through their attorneys. In most of the cases the United States government, in the appraisal process and appraisal report, there's a page and statement that says "Special and Limiting Conditions" page. And the page says, "Properties to be appraised as if under the following conditions..." The government would give these conditions out and the appraiser would appraise the property according to those conditions, which would then be stated in the appraisal report. In several incidences, the special conditions put on the appraisal had the effect of lowering the value of that person's property.

When I was hired I was told to appraise the property free and clear of all encumbrances- period. And my appraisal would come out quite a bit higher. We would go to court and, in all cases, the land owner won in every instance- not the government- which was delightful.
(chuckles)

G: So overall, more or less, how many houses did you appraise?
Can you remember?

W: Several hundred. In fact, they have the files. I don't

know how many are there. And, probably, [there are] some [files] that I lost. So I just don't know. There's just a lot of things that went on in the Chamizal, little stories here and there. But it was a major project. It got El Paso, Texas out of it's recession. It certainly did bring this city back into prosperity.

G: Did you have any contact with city officials?

W: No. No, this was a federal project. The city didn't have anything to do with this.

G: Was there any city planning going on at the time?

W: No, this was a federal project. The city nor the state didn't have anything to do with this project at all. It was [the] federal government.

I'm sure I've overlooked a lot of things so [if] you want to ask me questions, go right ahead. I can't think of everything.

G: That's okay.

W: What do you have?

G: You mentioned that you knew Commissioner [Joseph F.] Friedkin...

W: Yes, very...

G: ...during the time you worked as an appraiser. Did you communicate with him at all or see him?

W: Yes. A very fine man. He just simply was wonderful. I do not know a finer man than Ambassador Friedkin- period.
(chuckles)

G: Would you like to add anything else?

W: Oh, I don't think so. After the appraisals were all done and over with, [of] course, I got back with my commercial real estate. In fact, I did my commercial real estate right along with my appraisals at the time...(knocking at door, taping stopped and started again)

[In] the savings of the files, it's always proper procedure to save your files for at least two, three, or four years after any project or anything. And in one case- about three years later I recall- I got a telephone call from the United States Attorney in San Antonio, who was a friend of mine at the time. And I can't recall his name but....And he told me, he said, "Do you still have the file on..." so and so? And I said, "Well, just a minute and let me look." And I went to the files and I said, "Yes, I've got it. It's here." He said, "Well, are you available to go to court?" I said, "Yes, but my God! That's three or four years later! Good grief! What happened?" He said, "You're not going to believe it. The good, old U.S. government paid the wrong person." I said, "Oh, you're kidding!" He said, "No. This guy lived in Los Angeles. And he owned the house and his brother was living in the house. And he let his brother live in the house. When the appraisers went by, the brother represented himself as being the owner of the house. And the title search showed that was the correct name and everything. It was the correct address and so forth. And

when it came time for the pay-off on the house the brother was paid and the house was torn down and everything. And about three years later [or] four years later, the brother came from Los Angeles to visit his brother and his neighborhood and couldn't find his house. And [he discovered] the neighborhood and everything was gone. And [he] had a fit and threw himself on the ground and couldn't understand. And [he] went to see the police and [the] police told him that his house was in the Chamizal and it was torn down. So he went and he got himself a lawyer and the lawyer got in touch with the government. And the title company and everybody was very embarrassed and red-faced. And I thought it was really funny. And I started laughing and I said, "Well, good. Spread some money around a little bit more. One guy's a crook and the other guy didn't get paid." So the United States government wound up paying twice for that house. That's another little tidbit that would be fun to laugh about.

Other than that, there's a lot of things that could come to my mind. But what I've said is mainly the high points or the highlights of the Chamizal project, and the historical significance of it, and how it got El Paso, Texas, especially, going again because our economy picked up quite a bit as a result of this absolutely huge undertaking. And people bought new houses, new houses were built, and El Paso's economy became much better after the Chamizal

project.

And I went on to other things in life and became very successful in the commercial real estate field. And which I'm still in at the age of sixty-five. And I'm still at it. And I think that's about it. And I thank everybody.

G: Well, we thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to come and talk to us.

W: It's my pleasure and if I can help you on any further fill-ins, why, call me and we can tape some more. And any time anybody wants to ask me about my young years as a child in El Paso and the College of Mines and coming over here to visit the [university] museum with my sisters in the Depression years and my Atomic Energy Commission years at Mercury, Nevada, I've got a few things to tell somebody if anybody wants to listen. So good luck to you with your project at the Chamizal. Thank you.

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

End of Interview