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Ralph Seitsinger

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This is Ross Teller interviewing Mr. Ralph Seitsinger in his home, on Tuesday, November 3, 1998.

RT: Mr. Seitsinger, where and when were you born?

RS: I was born in Kinross Iowa, January 13, 1916.

RT: I have read that your mother was from Germany, while your father's parents had been in the United State since before the Revolutionary War.

RS: That's not true. My mother's family came over on the same ship that General Eisenhower's family came over on in 1749. The Etsingers came over then. My father's relatives came over in 1725.

RT: I had read that for seven years you sold newspapers until you graduated high school. What did you learn from balancing work and school from such an early age?

RS: I enjoyed working and I had the energy so I got a newspaper route and received several commendations, including a gold watch, for not having any complaints. It was not that hard, actually, it was grade school up to high school. I could do the route in about an hour and a half. So I had plenty of time to study.

RT: You attended Mt. Union College in alliance Ohio. Then you moved to the University of New Mexico. What prompted this move?

RS: Two things: one was money, but my grandmother who lived in Albuquerque said, "Son, you're working too hard."

Because I was on a grant, but I was also holding two or three jobs and going to school. So she said, "Come out and live with us and you will do better because you will have more time to study." So I came out and lived with my uncle right across from the university.

RT: You graduated with a degree in chemistry, but later your career was in business. Why did you choose chemistry?

RS: I always did well in chemistry and it was a field that challenged me. It's only by sheer luck that I am not in chemistry today. I had been nominated for the biggest scholarship in the United States for chemistry but, because a fluke in a transfer of grades, it did not happen. So I went into teaching. I was head of the Science Department at El Rito Spanish-American Normal School.

RT: How did a normal school differ from a regular college?

RS: Well, a normal school is just two years. In many states you could teach with just two years of college.

RT: After you taught, you were an executive in boy scout work.

RS: That's right. I went from teaching to the Boy Scouts.

RT: What prompted this move?

RS: I had always been interested in Scouting. From an early age, I had either been Scout Master or assistant.

And the Governor of New Mexico, Johnny Miles, was on my troop committee. The Field Scout executive was a class mate from the University of New Mexico, and he convinced me that I should get into Scouting. I was in an highly political situation at El Rito, because the Governor was on my committee, so I thought it would be a solid move.

RT: What did you enjoy about your job in Scouting?

RS: Scouting is a real challenge because it is the counterpart to a gang. I used to say when I was in scouting, that every night when I put my head on my pillow that I felt that I had accomplished something to help boys in the future. You meet the finest people in the world in Scouting. The Scoutmasters and Den Mothers are among the finest people on this earth because they give of themselves unselfishly. The people on the Boy Scout Council are also among the finest people, giving of themselves for a great program. Everyday was a joy.

RT: Do you still volunteer in Scouting?

RS: I belong to the Baden Powell Society, which is an advisory group to the Boy Scout Council. It meets monthly with the Scout executive about programs that would make Scouting stronger. To be in this society

you must be a Silver Beaver or an Eagle Scout. It is a select group.

RT: After that you were in the Army with the Adjutant Generals Office.

RS: I was trained as a separation officer. My last assignment was here at Fort Bliss before I was separated.

RT: Were you assigned anywhere else?

RS: No, that was my first. I was at Camp Lee Va. and Camp Oglethorpe. But my assignment was here at Fort Bliss.

RT: You were a separation officer?

RS: I was a Classification Assignment Officer, but mainly concentrated on separation.

RT: What were your duties?

RS: I handled separation papers and counseled separating soldiers about benefits our family needs. ?

RT: Did your military experience influence your later life?

RS: Yes, some of the training I got in the military. There were some fine professors at Fort Oglethorpe that benefited my later life.

RT: After the Army you came to El Paso?

RS: I went to Albuquerque. Mr. Lane who owned Lane Furniture and had been one of my Scoutmasters asked me to come down and help him run his business.

RT: In 1947, you opened your own furniture store.

RS: Yes, I got a chance to buy the Ambler Furniture Company in Ysleta.

RT: What was it about the furniture business that motivated you to have your own store?

RS: Well, I was working at the store with Mr. Lane and E. B. "Pappy" Ambler came by and said that he was going to sell his store. So I thought that I would ^{buy} it, if I could raise the money. I raised part of the money and he said, "Well, I want you to have it so go ahead and take it and pay me the rest later." He saw to it that I had a furniture store.

RT: What were some of the biggest obstacles when you were starting your business?

RS: Financial mainly: I started with a 2,000 dollar loan from my aunt, 2,000 dollars from my mother-in-law. Other than that, just hard work was the thing that it took. I had a wife that would take care of the store, while I went out and drummed up business. It was a time when soldiers were getting out and they were a rich market. I met many of my future friends as new customers.

RT: You went from one furniture store to three between 1947 and 1961. To what do you attribute your success.

RS: One reason was that I had a small furniture store where P and M Grocery is now and I bought the American Cafe

on the corner. That burned down when a truck crashed into it. I had almost a complete loss. I had a business interruption policy that I hadn't paid my first premium on. So I bought the Grimsey Young, it is now Household and is still there, store on North Loop Drive. Later I opened Airport Furniture on Airport Rd., with a man from another furniture company.

RT: In a newspaper article at the time of your election as mayor, it stated that Raymond Telles was instrumental in getting you into politics. How did you meet Mr. Telles?

RS: That's the story of me getting into politics. I had heard a rumor that Mr. Roy Hoard, head of the Kingmakers, that had picked candidates for office throughout the history of El Paso, had gone to Raymond Telles, who was a county clerk, and said, "Raymond, I hear you're thinking of running for mayor." And Raymond said, "Mr. Hoard, I really am." He said (Mr. Hoard), "if you want to be mayor of this town you have to go through me." That statement caused the hair of the back of my head to stand up. And I said, "I don't like that in the United States." I didn't know Raymond very well, but that he was a good man. So I decided I would see him some day. We happened to pass at the International Club, and I said, "I want to go down to

see you." The Lower Valley had recently led the fight to not be annexed. We took it all the way to the Supreme Court and lost. Anyhow, he came down to see me and I said, "Raymond, I'll help you anyway I can." As I said, I led that fight and he needed the Lower Valley. There was 150,000 people down there. He said, "I have the different elements of the city put together, if we could get the Lower Valley we could swing this election." I said again, "I'll help you anyway I can. You need money, whatever. I'll help you get candidates. But I'm not going to run for office. I've got a business to run." We put the ticket together. Mr. Pooley suggested Ted Bender. Jack White had been in Scouts with me. And Ernie Craigo had served in the Army with him. And we tried for months to fill the fourth Alderman position. And the lower valley people had put up the money, K. B. Ivey and Joe Yarbrough. They had put the money in the state bank in Ysleta. Joe Yarbrough was leaving town and he said, "If you run for office, the money is in the bank." This was our filing fee, because we didn't have any money. Anyhow, I went to my wife, who was in the hospital, and she said, "Well, I guess you're going to run anyhow. I'm against it, but go ahead." We ran and the People's Ticket beat out the Kingmakers. It took

the Lower Valley to do it. I had recently been on TV. I had a show for two years called "Seitsinger's Guestbook." It was when TV first came on, and anything on people watched. So I was well-known by that time, too.

RT: How long were you alderman?

RS: As alderman, I was mayor pro-tem under Raymond Telles for him four years.

RT: What was the most important thing you accomplished as alderman?

RS: It was a joint effort because Raymond and I worked very closely. All of us together negotiated the transfer of the water company holdings, where the Fort Bliss golf course is for Sierra Vista. All of that became land for the city. Running the city was a joint effort. The development of the Lower Valley roads.

RT: What made you decide to run for mayor?

RS: I'd given four years at that time. Being in politics is an ego trip unless you're ^{with} crooked. I'd been mayor pro-tem and enjoyed it. It's nice to be looked to as a city father. It was different at that time because we were elected by all the people, not like the city is fractured today into eight little parts. We were looked to by all the people. So it was kind of an ego trip. So, I had spent so much time out of my

business already, I thought I should give it a go. So that's what caused me to feel that I could accomplish some things that Raymond and I had started.

RT: You had mentioned that you were a member of "The People's Ticket." In 1961 when you ran for mayor, Mr. Ponce was the mayoral candidate for "The Greater El Paso Team" Can you explain what this ticket concept means.

RS: I developed that name. We felt that we represented all of the city. The Kingmakers up to that time had picked the candidates. Not that they were bad. They were good people. They were the people the Kingmakers put the money with. We tried to create the impression that we were the people on the street, not the people up there. In a sense we were. The bankers and lawyers and people with power were who put up the money for the candidates. So, we distinguished ourselves as people off the streets, not some high-powered group.

RT: In 1961, "The People's Ticket" submitted a platform of ten planks. These were mostly centered on expansion and improvement of facilities. Who was the chief architect of this platform?

RS: We jointly put it together. I was mayor, so I probably put most of that platform together.

RT: Were you and the four alderman candidates in agreement on this platform?

RS: I'm sure we were.

RT: In researching your term, it appears you were very serious about expansion of facilities, judging by the different bond issues: water, airport, downtown parking. Which of these three issues do you think was the most important?

RS: I had served on the airport board. As alderman, the airport was under my jurisdiction. Up until the new one today, the airport that I was in on planning served for these many years as our airport. So, naturally, that was one of the main things. The other main thing is, during my administration there was more land dedicated to park use than in all the history of El Paso. The convention center we spent a lot of time on. But we lost. Our plan for the convention center would have taken all the land from Santa Fe Street down to the depot and around to Paisano. We had a fifty percent larger facility, than is now built, for three quarters of the cost. Many said we didn't push hard enough, because it looked like a downtown deal, but it was really for all the city. And the downtown lighting happened in my administration.

RT: Getting back to the international center, I had read that it was defeated by around 2,300 votes. Did that margin make it easier or worse for you all?

RS: Naturally, I was heartbroken. We needed a convention center and we lost that bond issue.

RT: You attributed that defeat to "a resentment against taxes." How do you think the average taxpayer would have benefited.?

RS: To be a great city you have to have facilities. You have to bring in people, business, and industry. Any community without a convention center will probably die. At that time, we adopted the name "The International City." In my opinion, it's a pity that we don't bring that up again. No place else in the world do two great countries meet at two great cities.

RT: Another issue was the streamlining of offices and the elimination of unnecessary personnel. This was an unusual concept when you were mayor, did this idea come from your business experience?

RS: I'm sure it did. I tried to run it as a business. I tried to make efficient every department we could. I was blessed with great department heads. They ran the city. Up to that time, the city put money in the banks and didn't get interest. I called in George Matkin, Sam Young and Wylie Castillo. They were the heads of

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the three banks here. Joe Higgins, my comptroller, and I said, "The day is gone when you use our money for free." I called Jim Clausen, the present comptroller, at the comptrollers office. That move today means twelve million a year. We did run a tight ship. And we under spent our budget every year.

RT: I found that you were a hands-on mayor. In August 62, you went to Kern Place and followed the garbage collection route, because they complained about their service. You could have sent a subordinate. Why did you do that yourself?

RS: I like to take people's word for it, but I like to see hands-on whats going on. I learned that in my own business. You learn by problems. Problems are a good thing because, if you don't have them, you get complaisant. If you get a complaint, you have to solve it. That's what being in business is.

RT: Do you remember any other instances when you did something like that?

RS: Not Really. I went with the fire chief down to the Insurance Commission in Austin when we went to keep up our fire rating. So, we have one of the best fire ratings in the state of Texas. I don't remember any other hands-on things. I never made a big deal of it because that's how I thought the job should be done.

RT: Why did you think that?

RS: Because that's how I ran a business. I have a good business reputation today because people continue buying from us, because they got service. That's what a city administrator is supposed to do, serve the public.

[Tape was turned off because interviewee's wife came into room, and interviewee wanted to show the interviewer a synopsis of his mayoral term.]

RT: Could you explain the Twin Plant concept?

RS: The Twin Plant concept is interesting. Frank O'Dowd and I consulted on the concept of using the inexpensive labor we had across the border. At that time, a Mexican laborer made four to five dollars a day. We have the know-how and engineering facilities on this side. Our idea was to put those two together. But, originally, our concept was to make El Paso County a free trade zone and a like area of Mexico. We were going to get our government to declare this a free trade zone in cooperation with Mexico City, so we could bring raw materials into this area, have them fabricated, and sent all over the United States. I was out of office before this happened. Anyhow, we

delivered this concept to the labor department in Mexico City. They were smart enough to engross this idea. They made a twenty five kilometer strip along the Mexican border. Now, this concept has become a tremendous enterprise. Now, the Mexican government has expanded it into all of Mexico. There are 179 plants of outs there now. For El Paso, it's been a great program. It's also helped the Juarez economy.

RT: Could you tell me about the anti-discrimination ordinance in El Paso?

RS: It wasn't really my idea. This was put together by Ted Bender and another alderman, without my knowledge. I was against it when they proposed it because they had done it in this manner. I said, "Look, we are a cosmopolitan city all over. We do not need to put a gun to business people's heads." I called together the apartment and housing groups, Hotel-Motel Association, Restaurant Association, and said, "Gentlemen, the day has come when we will not discriminate. We are a city of love that respects each other. The council wants to pass an ordinance to make this a law. I am against it, but I need a promise and commitment from all of you." They all agreed that they would voluntarily not discriminate in housing, restaurants, or anything else. I went back to my council and said,

"I would rather not have a law." I don't like to force people to respect each other. I said, "I would rather this come from the hearts of the people. I am now against the ordinance." I turned it down. In retrospect we had no problems with it. I thought it might foment a problem. When things like that happen, you have some hot-heads who would test the ordinance. I felt passing the law might cause some problems. Though, in principle, I believed in it. I am now proud that it passed. We were the first city I know to pass one.

RT: The north-south freeway was your idea. What made... (you think this freeway was necessary for El Paso?)

RS: We had talked about it with the highway engineers. The concept of circles around major cities is one Texas has always adopted. Because of our terrain, it was impossible. One day, I thought, "We have this bridge across the Rio Grande and the Transmountain Highway we are building. Why not tie them in with a highway?" I picked up the phone and called Dwight Greer, who was head of state highways. A girl answered and said, "The Highway Commissioner is in a meeting with the commissioners." I told her to tell him Mayor Seitsinger was calling and it was important I speak to

him. He came to the phone. I said, "I have a concept you ought to consider since you are meeting." He said, "That is a good idea we hadn't thought of. I'll go into the commission and present it right now."

That's how the north south freeway came into being.

RT: When did work on the north-south freeway begin?

RS: It took place rapidly after my administration. It was adopted at that meeting. I believe work started under Judson Williams, the mayor who followed me.

RT: When you left office you said, "True business principles had finally been applied to El Paso city government and esprit d'corps among city employees was the highest it has ever been." How do you see these two as being related?

RS: Anybody likes being patted on the back. I was blessed with great department heads who made the departments more efficient. When you do things better, you are prouder in your job.

RT: In '62, O'Dowd and Associates audited the city government. They found that the number of non-tested employees had fallen from 700 to 35 in a few years. How instrumental were you in bringing this change?

RS: I can't answer that. I don't know if that was one of our aims. It was just a matter of efficiency in government.

- RT: So you think it's just a natural extension of your business principles?
- RS: That's right. I would expect it to happen, but I didn't know that much was accomplished.
- RT: In that article you also said you "saw a future El Paso laid and planned as a result of the efforts of your administration." How well do you think El Paso followed the path to the future you imagined?
- RS: Pretty well. Most administrations have been prudent in annexation and caring for these areas. We had made the framework: the Chamizal settlement, a new valley sewer plant, the border highway. With this structure laid out, we had the framework for coming in and doing the job.
- RT: How did you become involved in the Chamizal settlement?
- RS: The airport board and I were flying to Mexico City. The president's personal pilot happened to be a good friend of Jim Mettler, the airport manager. We wanted to make it a true international airport with flights from here to Mexico City. We envisioned the flights originating in Denver, going to Albuquerque then to El Paso to Chihuahua to Mexico City. So a delegation of Jim Metler, Frank O'Dowd, myself and two *calderons* went to Mexico City. As we got off the plane, four well-dressed men approached us and asked, "Are you

Mayor Seitsinger?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I am ambassador Tom Mann and I would like to entertain you at the embassy and have lunch." I agreed. As we were finishing lunch, the ambassador said to me, "Mr. Mayor, do you think you could excuse yourself? I have something very important to talk to you about." He and his assistant, Frank Garcia, and I went into his office. Tom Mann said, "What I have to talk to you about you can't talk to anybody about. I have to have your confidential statement that you will not. We are negotiating a problem that's been created by the Chamizal that goes back to 1913 and the Mexican and US governments trying to settle a dispute on the boundary between the two countries that involves 5-600 acres of your city. If you tell me no now, it stops. I need the complete cooperation of you and your council. A lot of the work has been done. Joe Friedkin, who is the head of the International Boundary Commission in El Paso and Mr. Roldon, who is the engineer on the Mexican side, has done a lot of work on this. President Kennedy is interested in this and Lopez-Mateos wants this to happen. The land which is to be given up is to be taken out of your city." I said, "Mr. Ambassador, I have known about this for many years and I had hoped that it would be settled under the Telles

administration. But I assure you complete cooperation." We came back, and at the proper time went on record and did the negotiations to settle this. About three blocks of south El Paso were given up and we said you'd be remunerated for it. There was a big piece of land that came up to Paisano and back to the river that was given to the United States. The border was straightened out and lined with cement. This dispute was based on erosion and accretion. When the river would flood, it would go a little farther south. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo made the boundary the Rio Grande. The settlement was made, and we gave 640 acres of land back to Mexico. We gave them fifty million dollars. In the settlement, we negotiated for the sewer plant in the Lower Valley, the border highway, and the value of the houses in south El Paso to be paid by them. This development led to goodwill between the two countries, because before this the Communists would point down here and say, "Look how big brother treats his weaker neighbors."

RT: You had cited improvements in the police department and flood control in your administration, Both of these are vital. You also cited improvements in park lands and the library. Why are those things important for El Paso?

RS: Fusselman dam was built in my administration, and I believed in the police department. We had a good one with good moral. Chief Horack had a good reputation for being fair. Prior to the Telles administration, there were no Spanish speaking people on the fire department. We hired Spanish speaking and blacks, and had a well-integrated fire and police department. I was alderman in charge of libraries. When I became mayor, we built a library in northeast El Paso. Naturally, I felt that we needed good libraries because many of the schools don't have them for proper research. Until the east El Paso library was built, that library (northeast) was the last full library built in El Paso. I was on the committee to raise the money to build the Schwarz library on the east side. I raised more money for it than any other division.

RT: What are the importance of parks?

RS: Any great city has parks and free space. They are not only beautiful, they are a utility thing. They give people a recreational area. Since we have a large population without yards, parks are necessary. Having been in the Optimist Club, I sponsored baseball teams, and I believed in them as a place for young people to go. If you go to any park in our city, you'll see they are well used. I was pleased to see another park just

dedicated to Dick Shinaut, my personnel attorney and campaign manager. Parks and recreation cuts down crime, by taking the energy of youth we need to keep in that manner.

RT: When you left office, you were quoted as saying you thought your administration was the best the city had had. How do you think it compares to the ones that came after?

RS: We were in a time of fast growth and expansion of the city. During the period Raymond and I were in office, we expanded faster percentage-wise than ever, and probably since. We had to meet a number of expanding problems: utilities, facilities, police department, fire department. In the Telles administration, we got the Kress Collection here. I went to Washington DC to accept it. So we had a period when El Paso was in transition from small town to big city. I can't compare it with later administrations. We were a strong mayor city council and we ran the city. Today, we have one mayor and eight little mayors. How you make progress under that system, I don't know. I personally wouldn't serve under this system. In my case, the buck stopped at my desk. Now we have eight little mayors dividing the city. Any one can say,

"Hey, I don't care about the rest of the city. I'm only interested in the people who can vote for me."

RT: When you left office, you said you "were not a politician and weren't interested in becoming one."

What's your definition of a politician?

RS: A politician has his life geared around public service, dealing with laws and things like that. I was a business man and didn't intend on living my life that way. I didn't intend on staying in office. It was a blessed day when I was defeated. I remember the night the returns came in. I said, "I am so relieved that I can go back home and relax." When I was in office, I was a full-time mayor. I came in at 7:00 AM and didn't leave until eleven or twelve at night. I went three months without having one night home, and I was a man with a family: I had five children. I gave myself unstintingly to serve. I did not want to make a life of it. A lot of people came to me and said, "We'd like to have you statewide." I knew it was a bunch of bunk. Well, I don't know if they were serious or not. I enjoyed every minute, but I would not want to do it again. A politician to me is a person who spends their time creating laws and laying out the tenets of government to serve the people. I never envisioned that to be my life.

RT: To what do you attribute your success?

RS: Any success I've had God has guided me in. I don't take any credit for myself. When I saw something to be done, I did it. I take no credit for myself, other than to say I took the energy God had given me to serve in the manner I thought he wanted me to do. I still feel that way today. With the energy I have, I feel I should be doing something for people.