

11-5-1998

## Interview no. 935

Peter De Wetter

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### Recommended Citation

Interview with Peter De Wetter by Kay A. Mooy, 1998, "Interview no. 935," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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**Oral History Interview with Peter de Wetter**

**November 5, 1998**

**Conducted by Kay Mooy**

**At the UTEP Development Offices**

**Tape Identification**

KM: November 5, 1998 This is an interview conducted by Kay Mooy, a graduate student at UTEP, with former Mayor Peter de Wetter.

**Interview**

KM: Mr. de Wetter, could you give me some basic background information on you?  
Where were you born?

PdW: I was born in New Rochelle, New York in 1920, the son of a civil engineer. I lived in New Rochelle until approximately six years of age, when my father was asked to move to Berlin, Germany, where he was engaged in a variety of major engineering projects. At that point, we moved and I was then sent by my parents to a school called Salen, which is on the Lake in Constance, which is a very prominent, was then and still is private school--grade schools through junior college actually. I stayed there for three years and then the depression came and we moved back to the United States.

KM: That must have been interesting to be back here for the depression. Was your father affected by it? Was it a hard time?

PdW: He was very deeply affected. He was an extremely wealthy person and because of what happened in this country, lost all his investments. So basically when we came back, all that was salvaged was a very old-fashioned eight-story apartment house in Brooklyn, New York.

KM: Did you live there?

PdW: Yes.

KM: So that was quite a change for you from private school and Switzerland?

PdW: I should say so. I might say on the school it was the forerunner of the Outward Bound system. It was founded by a man named Kurt Hann, who was a German Jew, and he had to leave when Hitler came. He went over to Scotland and founded Gordonstoun, which is a very famous school today. Its origin was to teach the British sailors how to survive torpedoing in the North Sea. But the whole Outward Bound philosophy was embodied in the curriculum of that school.

KM: Do you think that had something to do with the person you turned out to be?  
Being there so young?

PdW: Probably, because I was seven to ten and those are kind of the formative years.

KM: Especially for young *men*.

PdW: Yes.

KM: When you returned, then you lived in New York?

PdW: Yes.

KM: And what happened to you? Did you go to public school, I assume?

PdW: Yes, I went to public schools for a year and then I ended up going to a farm in Connecticut owned by two Columbia professors and they had young children as well. And the concept was that my education menu would be enhanced by sort of in depth teaching on their part, but in exchange, of course, we worked on the farm. It turned out it was more farm work than it was education. That was also education in its own way.

KM: But, do you think that was formative, for you to learn the hard labor?

PdW: Yes, oh, absolutely. Oh, sure, absolutely.

KM: And that probably wouldn't have happened without the depression and the change in fortune of your parents?

PdW: No, I'm sure that's true.

KM: Did you father recover from the depression then or later?

PdW: Yes, he, at that point, was in his mid-fifties, and you have to understand that he was actually a Baltic nobleman, with an eight hundred year history in Estonian. As you can visualize, this would be a very dramatic and a very difficult period. All his life, photography had been his hobby. As a result, he was able to become the curator of photography at the Brooklyn Museum. He pioneered many photographic concepts and was widely recognized, both here and in Great Britain, for his work. He lived until at age 70 he passed away.

KM: What were your mother and father's education levels?

PdW: My father studied engineering in Dresden and received a degree in civil engineering, met my mother, who was a New England girl from a well know New England family. They both met in Dresden. She was studying music and he was studying engineering. As a result, they fell in love. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1903 and they were married in 1905. My mother was not a college graduate, in those days that was very typical.

KM: In those days, that would have been unheard of for a woman?

PdW: She was quite a linguist. She spoke five languages, was a great writer, poet, sculptor.

KM: So you were quite accomplished within the family. Are there brothers and sisters?

PdW: I would say yes. I had two sisters both now dead. One is seven years my senior and the other eleven years my senior. I might add that my parents lived in Leningrad when the Russian revolution broke out. My father was in charge of building the railroad for many months in central Russia and they escaped across Siberia with my two sisters because my mother had foresight enough to buy tickets on the Trans-Siberian railroad six months before the revolution broke out. So they witnessed the Rasputin era and they witnessed much of what transpired in the early days of the revolution. My mother has a fascinating tape called *A Backseat at the Russian Revolution*, which has been published and belongs to the History Department at New Mexico State as a matter of fact. I think you could get a copy from that institution if you are interested. It really is a firsthand eyewitness account of those very early days when the revolution broke out.

KM: So I assume they shared all of this with you as you were growing up, their account of all this. That had to be formative for you. That had to be important to you to have this rich history. And your wife is a history major?

PdW: Oh, sure. Oh, of course, absolutely. Oh, yes. Yes, she taught history here at this institution.

KM: And do you have a history interest because of all this?

PdW: Only because of the extensive travel. I've traveled all over the world for many, many years. I was in Berlin during the Olympics. We don't want to get ahead of ourselves here.

KM: No. I think that's probably enough background information. I know you joined the Army as a private, is that correct, you enlisted?

PdW: Yes, I enlisted shortly after Pearl Harbor. I was in the infantry. My eyesight was poor so I couldn't go in the Air Force or the Navy. I went to OCS, was commissioned. While there, this has bearing on the present situation. I spent the one weekend I had free with my sister in Washington, D.C. and her husband. They said to me: "You know if you ever go to El Paso, there are two girls we think you might like to meet." They gave me my wife's name and another girl. My first impression was "Where is El Paso?" About three months later, having finished maneuvers down in Louisiana, I was assigned to the First Cavalry Division out here at Fort Bliss when it was still mounted cavalry. I remembered the two names and I called my wife first because she had the more interesting name. We were engaged about 30 days later and married in August 1943.

KM: Did you ever meet the other girl?

PdW: Oh, yes. We are very close friends. She is one of my wife's best friends. She lives in Connecticut. She teaches at Harvard and Columbia.

KM: Interesting. Well, now that we're with your military career, you received the Bronze Star and the European Campaign medal with six battle stars. What are your most vivid memories of the War?

PdW: Probably the invasion, I went in D+3 into Omaha Beach. I recall all that is so adequately and effectively portrayed in *Saving Private Ryan*. In fact, I didn't want to go to the movie but I took my grandson. No one can go through an experience like that and the subsequent months in France and the Battle of the Bulge and then

Germany without being deeply affected in a variety of ways. We have been back to the beaches more than once. During the Battle of the Bulge when there was such massive confusion, I hid out with a Belgium family and we have kept up with them through three generations now. We have been back to Belgium many times. The thing that I remember probably most of all was the cold in the Argonne Forest. That was probably the coldest winter in a hundred years. It is just hard to verbalize the misery that winter as a result of the cold.

KM: Were our troops then under-equipped to deal with the cold?

PdW: Yes, they were under-equipped. What happened, through faulty intelligence, my term, why the Germans broke through in Hitler's last massive attempt to divide us when they wanted to reach Antwerp to destroy the Allies' capabilities to receive supplies. Of course, it failed. But that campaign had more casualties (89,000 German casualties) the greatest number of casualties in any engagement in any war. As I recall, for about a week it was complete chaos. They would put on an American uniform, speak a little American dialogue, you know language, just to confuse our troops, which very thinly spread out and they would just roll right over us, of course.

KM: You were an officer in ordinance and stationed in England?

PdW: Yes, I received my commission in the ordinance department and later was transferred to Intelligence but, yes, I was stationed in England for about three weeks, I guess maybe a month

KM: And then France?

PdW: And then we went into Normandy. And went through the campaign in Belgium and then into Germany.

KM: Germany. I have all that. What were your experiences like in this while going on deeper and deeper? Was this a formative thing for you that brought back changes in your life because of what you were experiencing there?

PdW: Oh, I don't think beyond just the very maturing experience. Of course, unlike subsequent engagements the whole country was caught up in this effort at home. That spilled over to the morale of all of us overseas and I made many deep friendships, many, which I still maintain today during this experience. It may or may not be in your records, but I was one of the early ones to come home because we were supposed to participate in the invasion of Japan. By that time, I was on the intelligence staff, First Army. The First Army Headquarters was Bymeir. I happened to go accidentally to Buchenwald, which was a concentration camp. I was there with my driver. Our troops swept through and kept going. We took, so to speak, a wrong turn and stumbled into this thing. The conditions at Buchenwald—those thousands of people, both living and dead, and near dead was just really a searing experience. In fact, one of your history professors at UTEP has written the definitive book on Buchenwald, David, he's chairman of the History Department.

KM: Hackett.

PdW: Hackett. His book was widely acclaimed. He was asked and he asked me to go along with him to participate, along with Sunshine Schwartz here, in a panel at the



Holocaust Museum at the Smithsonian in Washington where we talked about this.

That would have to be one of the most as I say searing experiences.

KM: You were not prepared for that by anything you had heard in advance?

PdW: No, we didn't hear anything.

KM: You hadn't heard anything?

PdW: We hadn't heard anything.

KM: What actually was your job with the Intelligence then?

PdW: Having gone to Germany as a youngster, speaking the language and also speaking it at home, and also spending a summer at the Olympics in 1936; it was mainly my German that they wanted to take advantage of, my knowledge of the German language. My assignments were classified.

KM: Then, would you describe yourself as a self-made man?

PdW: Yes.

KM: I understand you had some advantages coming up?

PdW: I never went to college. I went right to work when I was eighteen. My first job was with the R. H. Macy Company in New York on 34th Street as a stock boy at \$15 a week. My family was so highly educated. My Mother and Father made 27 trips to Europe before I was twelve years old. I traveled a great deal and I was really bored with school because I never really had the sort of fundamental education that anyone really needs to progress through the educational process. In many ways, I was ahead of a lot of other kids who did go to school. So, I just never was interested.

KM: Do you think this type of being active in the business world, coming back and entering as a returning officer from World War II, the type of chances you had to advance yourself at that time, are those chances still available and would they work in today's political scenes and social settings?

PdW: I don't think in today's world that someone could, with some limited exceptions, could do what many of us did who did not have a college education if that's what you're asking.

KM: Yes, something like that.

PdW: This was 60 years ago, a different world. I've been blessed by a lot of energy, a lot of ambition; hopefully, a reasonable amount of intelligence, as a result I've had some just fascinating experiences all my life. I've never regretted it only because I consider myself well read. I consider myself well spoken. I consider myself fairly knowledgeable politically, economically and it is not really that I am a veteran. I am a great reader and so in my view you go to college to enjoy life primarily although today it has a different flavor to it.

KM: O.k. You were mayor of El Paso from 1969-1971, CEO of Bekins Company, as we talked before, a private business owner here in El Paso yourself, a World War II vet, and a community volunteer and activist. Which one of these roles do you want to be remembered for and which stands out the most in your mind and for what reason?

PdW: I think as we get older and of course, as I have said I am almost 79, I think if a person can share the fruits of their labors with persons, or interests, or organizations or causes outside of oneself that that is a richness that comes to that

person that is very special and I've been very blessed in being financially successful and I've been able to do what I can to help a variety of worthwhile things in the community. That has given me a great deal of satisfaction over the years. Reputation, integrity and character—these are all attributes that I think are obviously honorable so to speak.

KM: You were an active member of the Rio Grande Girl Scout Council?

PdW: Yes, I was one of its first presidents actually, which is kind of unusual since I have three sons.

KM: I was going to ask you about that. *The Herald Post* stated in an article dated January 1, 1969 that you considered your 15 years in the Girl Scout movement as the most satisfying achievement in at that point in your life. Why was that?

PdW: I think because I saw in those days, the Girl Scouts at least here in El Paso was a very, very effective organization touching lives, improving lives and doing much of what I see other organizations doing today. I can't remember why I said what I did at that time but I mean I was very impressed with the quality of the program and the impact it was having at that early stage of my civic experience which was rather limited at that point. I was very impressed with what they had accomplished and were accomplishing.

KM: You just commented that it was unusual for you since you had three boys. How did you become involved in that program and was it an entirely different experience for you?

PdW: Well, I'll tell you how. Marian Sanders, who is the deceased widow of David Sanders, who is very well know in El Paso was on that board and she asked me in

the early days if I'd come to a luncheon. She's the one that recruited me. So I got busy on the board and one of the things that I was asked to do was become chairman of their cookie sales. We were so successful in El Paso that they asked me to go to the national convention in St. Louis to talk about how to sell cookies, which to me it was just a marketing program. You know, whether it is Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts or the YMCA or any one of 50 other organizations; the principle of serving on boards, being involved and setting policies, it really involves—the product is different, the organizations are different but the principles of management requisites are very similar.

KM: So you were using your natural talents and your business acumen?

PdW: Sure, sure.

KM: You also worked with the Goodwill Industries on their national board of directors. Was that a unique experience?

PdW: Yes, because they have a particular credo that I really appreciate and that's helping them to help themselves. I'm sure you're familiar with the product. Of course, we had a very active operation. I was president of the local Goodwill as well. The principle of taking someone who is physically disadvantaged and teaching that person to become a self-sustaining individual is pretty hard to beat. That is their mission and they do it very successfully.

KM: From another newspaper article that I read about you, you were very excited that *Look* magazine named El Paso an All-American City in 1970. What do you think contributed to this designation?

PdW: Well, back in 1970 I had just succeeded Justin Williams and the city was on a roll, so to speak. We sold the bonds for the Civic Center and let the contract. We had established a Job Corps. I had been in office two days when I received a call from the Moody foundation saying that the Cortez Hotel would be a great place to have a Job Corps, which I guess they owned at that time. I said, "What's a Job Corps?" Well, we got busy, obviously and Joe Aguilar, who was head of Project Bravo here and is still today and I went to Baltimore. We looked at various Job Corps. We figured out that the reason that they had not all been successful was they weren't training local people for local jobs. Given the high unemployment rate in El Paso, both then and now, we figured if we could come up with a way where employers in El Paso would commit to hiring graduates of the Job Corps we would start here that it would be worth doing. We did. We hired David Carrasco. As you now probably know, this is the number one Job Corps in the country both in those days and since then. It has turned out to be a marvelous asset to the community. That was one of the things that I think led to that designation.

KM: Did you stay involved with the Job Corps later then?

PdW: Well, of course, I left El Paso. So the answer is no but I, when we came back in 1989, had a number of visits with David. I remained a good friend [to the program] and so I've been following it. I know Mary Young well. I followed the program very closely. I also think that we reached out to the community, this was in the early days, before that was as popular as it is today. We had sessions of the city government, department heads and the counselors all over the city. We made a special effort to cement relationships with Juarez. It was the time of Brown

Berets and extreme Hispanic militancy. I worked very hard to ameliorate that and set up I think some very good relationships with the Hispanic community. It was the time of Kent State when five avid students from UTEP marched to City Hall. I told the police to give them ice water to cool them down. I led a march back up to campus. They vented for about two hours. I think a combination of these kinds of things probably led to that.

KM: There was the issue back then that is still a problem for El Paso and that's the air pollution. I read an article about it where you were proud of what you had done so far by getting the big businesses to try and comply and then you worked on the little businesses. Could you tell me about some of the steps you did take?

PdW: It's very difficult to remember specifics. Again, this is almost thirty years ago. I can remember Asarco was one of the major, larger businesses. Of course, El Paso's air pollution problem knows no boundaries first of all. We can only do this side through enforcement but we can not do on the Mexican side. We can use education. We can use persuasion. You know now days, last year I think there were only two days where we fell below the federal minimum in El Paso. So we did a vast improvement over the years. I think the whole national climate, the whole public awareness, the whole business consciousness, plus enforcement, plus regulations have totally created a climate that has really improved their pollution. Of course, there are some days when we are bad. It's not nearly as bad. You know I lived in Los Angeles for nineteen years, you talk about air pollution, theirs is the worst in the country. Yet now through the methods that everybody is talking about there's been a vast improvement here in El Paso.

KM: Let's return to where you were mayor and the Civic Center was built, something major in your time.

PdW: It wasn't built during the time I was mayor. I signed the contract. I sold the bonds to enable it to be built. Then I let the contract finally for it to be built.

KM: O.k.

PdW: I was not mayor when it was built.

KM: O.k. not when it was built. I thought it had started in Mayor Williams's time and that you had inherited it.

PdW: The concept had and the bond issue was passed. I was president of the Chamber of Commerce at the time he was mayor working with the business community. Judson was able to get a favorable vote on the bond issue from the voters to get it built. Then he went out of office so it was approved but that was it.

KM: So then the mayor that followed you Bert Williams actually inherited getting the project up? So his problem was the one of going \$2.1 million over his budget?

PdW: That's his problem. I know nothing about that.

KM: O.k., we'll leave that one with him. When you were mayor, the tax rate was \$1.77 per \$100 assessed value and that was 1971 from an *El Paso Times* story. Now it is still only \$2.97, which doesn't even keep pace with inflation. Do you believe the change then is that we have not expanded our services? Are our services bigger and better?

PdW: Well, first of all El Paso has always prided itself on having a very good financial rating by the various rating services: Moody's, Standard Poor's. It did then and it does today. It has excellent financial rating. Our problem is, it seems to me, that

when I was mayor the population was about 3 hundred and 10 or 25 thousand. I think this city was about 112,000 square miles. Today it's close to 700,000 and it's about 250,000 square miles. The per capita income both then and now is among the lowest in the United States. Industrial development is just now beginning to really I think take hold. We are really beginning to attract businesses to El Paso. Hence, payrolls but more importantly, as importantly, the tax base is increasing. So we have needs of doubling the population and doubling of the geographical size with all the roads and all the infrastructure things that we need. And yet, the ability to develop tax revenue to fund the added but necessary improvements is still limited. So I think given the realities of what we face regardless of who's the mayor, the city has done a very good job in meeting this problem. I think the problem will be somewhat ameliorated as we continue our efforts to attract new industry and also we continue our efforts to raise the income level in this city which is, I think, very strongly influenced by the what this is function of the fragileness.

KM: When you said "no matter who the mayor is," how important is the role of the mayor?

PdW: Well, its important in this city because we have a strong mayor-council forum. The mayor is the chief executive officer. There are only two cities in Texas of any size where this is true: Houston and El Paso. It was true then and it is still true today. We do not have a city manager so the mayor is directly responsible and is directly in charge of all the city departments. So that makes him the chief executive officer. So the buck stops with the mayor. So it is a very important



position. His role has been complicated by the fact that when I was mayor we had four aldermen at large. Today we have eight representatives by district. To find people who can balance the needs of their own constituents in their district vis-a-vis the larger city is a formidable task.

KM: I want to go to some of the direct issues that were there when you were mayor. You were appointed as chairman of Texas Urban Development Commission and were quoted in the *El Paso Times* on May 23, 1970 as saying that the new TUDC will, and this is your direct quote: "work to make the urban areas of Texas places where present and future Texans will want to live." Were you able to accomplish that goal and how, with what specific programs?

PdW: You know like many dreams it starts with the desire to do something and it starts with the desire to make things pay. Programs like this take years to accomplish. We just got through talking about our challenges today. So the answer is we were not able to accomplish very much but I think we started the process of thinking long range. That really, until you think long range you know, you don't build a school which takes five years to build and suddenly find out that it is half as big as it needs to be. Forward planning is probably the thing that grew out of this effort that is really paying dividends.

KM: In that same article, you said and I quote you

PdW: I sure did talk a lot.

KM: we "were already knee deep in seeking a successful solution to local housing problems for low income families." What solutions were you talking about and how successful were they?

PdW: Well, south El Paso had traditionally been a major problem for this city because of prior to your time or you may remember, for many, many we years we had hundreds of tenements in south El Paso—brick structures, one toilet at the end of the hall, fifty families living in really very sub-standard conditions. We had a fine Housing Authority financially but they hadn't built any public housing so we were able to jump start that process number one to get some public project funded and underway. Number two; we distributed public housing across the city rather than having it concentrated in one area. Some of my good spousal friends didn't enjoy but it is a fact of life that distributed it was. And thirdly, we began a program of extensive rehabilitation of these units to bring them up to code. There are now for the most part up to code. I'm very happy that that took place.

KM: What were the actual sites? Do you remember the names of any of the projects?

PdW: Sites? Look them up in the phone book. I don't remember. You mean today?

KM: No, back then.

PdW: Well, we're talking about the second ward. You know, we are talking about south El Paso. If that's what you mean. That was the geographical area in broad terms.

KM: Some of the housing projects seem to have names now maybe they didn't then.

PdW: They all had names. Many of these were not projects. They were just tenements because the Public Housing Authority had not built nearly as many units as were required. So you had lots and lots of people living in sub-standard conditions with no projects. They just lived in a building. It's the buildings I'm talking about. What we did we started the building of housing projects scattered around the city into which to move these people.

KM: O.k. thank you. You were also appointed at about the same time to serve as chairman of the Far West Texas Commission to urge passage of the Texas Water Plan. The *El Paso Times* reported that it was to "divert water from surplus areas to more arid areas of Texas via a complicated system of dams, lakes and channels."

PdW: I don't think anything happened with it. On the water problem we just talked about an example of planning. I think the Public Service Board was very far sighted for an example, purchasing this land down in Sierra Blanca. I think in the next millenium there is no question but we will be piping water into El Paso. So that's an example where forward planning is absolutely crucial for this area. That's just with water let alone all the other problems.

KM: You keep going to the issue of forward planning was this something new with your administration or had we been working towards this in El Paso for awhile at that time?

PdW: I don't want to sit in judgement of anybody else but we did feel—our administration did feel strongly that this was something that was something that was essential. I think it has been the case, to a greater or lesser extent, since then. We do generally a pretty good job of planning.

KM: This is a fun question now. You were invited to Cape Kennedy to witness the launch of Apollo XI in July 1969. What was that experience like and what are your most vivid memories of that?

PdW: Well, it was a thrilling dynamic experience and nothing like anything that I'd ever seen in my life obviously. I think the force that you could feel when this rocket

lifted off was something that I'll remember all my life. It just permeated your whole being.

KM: When you returned from that launch, you were scheduled to decide some issues in the city council meeting about the issues involved with the proposed rent subsidy project and its opponents' objections to a 200 unit development in a single family neighborhood. Where was that project planned, if you remember and did it pass when you came back?

PdW: I don't actually remember the answer to either question. My sense is that this was again a part of the effort to stimulate more housing inventory. Right now, today, there have been significant efforts and improvements made in bringing the private sector into building affordable housing. We have 30,000 people in El Paso today that need affordable housing and there's no housing. So this effort is beginning and it's coming along. We started the Greater Housing Development Corporation just four years ago at the Chamber. I was the first chairman actually. Since then, they have really accelerated. We are getting off the track here.

KM: That's o.k. Off the track is fine.

PdW: I think that was the part of this total effort of improving housing inventory in the city.

KM: We've talked about your background being more business than political. You don't hit me as the political animal. The man before you ran four terms in a row and wanted a fifth probably. So what advantages or disadvantages did your business background provide you rather than the political background?

PdW: First of all, I'm a strong believer in the citizen serving and then getting out of the way. I don't think the politicians should ensconce themselves indefinitely. I think secondly as a businessman that has been successful there is an obligation that we all have to put something of ourselves back into the community in which we live in the political sense. Thirdly, if in fact you come from the kind of background that I did, you can offer yourself for public service then you have no axe to grind. You're not indebted to anybody. You're not obligated to anybody. You can make the kind of decisions that need to be made for the welfare of the community rather than for some personal political objective. That's how I tried to conduct myself while I was in office.

KM: What had been your basic major goals as mayor?

PdW: I wanted to stimulate downtown development. I wanted to improve the living conditions of thousands of our citizens in south El Paso. I wanted to maintain and encourage a closer relationship with the military. I wanted to also cause our relationship with Juarez to be much closer than it had been. Finally, I wanted to make myself, and our administration, available to the people geographically in comfortable ways so that we could sit down on a regular basis and talk about their concerns and talk about how we might solve some of their problems.

KM: And what kind of progress did your administration make towards these goals?

PdW: Oh, I would rate our administration probably as a "B".

KM: A "B"?

PdW: Being modest.

KM: With your modesty, why would you say a "B" rather than say average or above average?

PdW: A "B" is above average.

KM: O.k., then excellent with an "A"?

PdW: We were above average.

KM: It is just modesty that keeps you from the "A"?

PdW: Probably. You have to remember that in those days we ran as a ticket. The mayor was the chief executive officer and we really had a kind of oligarchy. I mean I ran it like an oligarchy so we got a lot of stuff done. You couldn't do that today.

KM: You were the subject of a lengthy article in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1978. Was that a high point of attention for you?

PdW: I don't remember the article.

KM: You don't remember the article?

PdW: I've been in lots of articles.

KM: This was a huge one that is mentioned in our *Times* but then I couldn't find the [Wall Street Journal] article and I wondered if you knew what the reaction here in town was like. Of course, you were probably living in California then.

PdW: Yes, we were living in California.

KM: It was about your whole career as a businessman in general.

PdW: I started as a stock boy. I spent a number of years in retailing at the White House right after the war. I was merchandising manager for a store in Colorado Springs. I had a wholesale venetian blind manufacturing company for a number of years. I owned a major international freight forwarding company. I was president of a

local moving and storage company here in Texas. I served on the boards of eleven public companies. I've been chairman of the board of a \$500,000,000 company, Executive Vice President of what today is a \$10,000,000,000 company. I say this not in any way as self-aggrandizement but my experience has been relatively broad and very eclectic. So I forgot what your original question was.

KM: When you get to that point that you have done all that you have done, so the media attention is not a major focus for you at any point?

PdW: No, I've been interviewed many, many times. Anybody that's involved with public corporations in a senior position is apt to find himself in that role.

KM: You are a veteran and El Paso is a military town and was probably more of military town when you first came back as a veteran. It was a little larger and all. Did this affect your term in office and if it did, how?

PdW: No, it had no bearing on it at all.

KM: You were also mayor at the height of Vietnam. Did this affect your administration at all?

PdW: At the height of Vietnam? Is that accurate? I can't remember all those dates.

KM: Well, I'm not exactly sure. It wasn't at the end of Vietnam and it wasn't at the beginning.

PdW: I think it was more the beginning than the end. I don't think all that we think about when we think about Vietnam had come to our consciousness in the early stages so I can't honestly say that that colored our thinking, our deliberations or really our lives if we are honest about it.

KM: When you were running for mayor you were quoted in the *El Paso Times* as saying in March 1969 that you "see a dynamic metropolitan area which is drawing attention from all over the country as one of the most progressive cities of the sixties." You went on to say that you and your slate of candidates "believed that this progressive impetus must be continued if El Paso is to achieve its rightful place as one of the countries great metropolitan complexes." Did El Paso achieve that place and how did you help make it happen?

PdW: I do not think El Paso has achieved that place today but I think a lot is happening that gives me cause for optimism that it is going to happen in the next millenium. El Paso has made a lot of progress. We in El Paso very often I think don't rate ourselves highly enough. I think we have an inferiority complex. I don't think we've done a particularly effective job of packaging and selling our assets. But this is changing now I'm pleased to say at least from my perspective. So, no, I didn't accomplish that. What we talked about is something that it doesn't take one administration. It's going to be a whole community effort. I was just listening to Carlos [Ramirez, current mayor] today give a State of the State report at Rotary and it was really very comprehensive, a lot of factual information. It bore out this stirring that this community is finally feeling within its loins, so to speak, to take advantage of its assets. I'm optimistic.

KM: That's good. When you announced your slate of candidates was that a normal way in El Paso politics or was that something new?

PdW: Well, I went out and recruited the people that ran with me. With one exception, we had one man, Roy Le Brand, die before the campaign got underway. But sure



if you can go to a community as a body, mayor and council, and you can sell yourself in terms of your objectives, your goals and what you want to accomplish and so on and you are elected by the electorate as that group then not only can you probably accomplish what you need but also be held accountable. So we did run as a ticket. It was very satisfying. I loved it. I really enjoyed it. It was just great.

KM: And then did it make it easier to work with these men because you had recruited them and put the ticket together?

PdW: Sure, probably.

KM: When you announced this slate you also said that you proposed forming a mayor's council for social problems.

PdW: Social action.

KM: To consider health, housing, education.

PdW: Problems is negative, actually it was a council for social action.

KM: Did you establish this council and what happened with it?

PdW: Yes, we did establish this council. We had a number of areas housing, recreation, a number of other. We had citizens from all walks of life recruited into these various groups. They met regularly. They went out into the community. They crystallized the problems. They brought the problems to the city council that addressed them. It was a feedback vehicle because you know when you get to be mayor or on the city council, you get to be insulated. You have to have a way in my view to reach out and be able to listen and be able to tune in on what the concerns are. Sometimes they are concerns that you don't have any idea about at

all. So this council was really the eyes and ears, in a positive sense, for the mayor and council in terms of how we could improve the city.

KM: Do you know where you brought the idea from? Was it something that you had used in business or was this just something brand new you had thought up on your own?

PdW: No, I think I just thought of it.

KM: Was it well received?

PdW: Yes, very well received.

KM: In 1971, you proposed a \$300,000 budget for a major promotional organization composed of five members each from the city and county development boards, the Chamber of Commerce was also to sit on it, to sell El Paso's potential national wide. Did that board work and what was the need at that time for such an innovation?

PdW: I hate to tell you that I don't remember a thing about it, which tells me that it didn't work.

KM: I was going to ask if it was the father of our Business and Tourism bureau?

PdW: Well, we had at that time the Industrial Development Corporation which was essentially driven by the private sector, of course the Chamber of Commerce. The city was not really involved with the Industrial Development in those days. You said \$300,000,000?

KM: Three hundred thousand dollars not \$300,000,000. No.

PdW: Oh, 300,000 that's a little better.

KM: I was wondering if you don't remember it you are not going to remember what kind of opposition you got to it?

PdW: No.

KM: So it must have been one of those things that went away.

PdW: Probably.

KM: Also in the *El Paso Times* you proposed in an article dated January 15, 1971 that the State Legislator should adopt legislation leading to a constitutional change that would permit consolidation of the El Paso county and city governments. Since we're still talking about this...

PdW: Sound familiar?

KM: Yes, what progress did you make on this proposal and what opposition did you meet and why hasn't it still happened?

PdW: First of all, vested interests don't like change nor do they like to be threatened. They don't want to loose their jobs. Secondly, in many small counties around the state of Texas, county government is really supreme. These people don't want to change. However, you think in El Paso where 95 or 96% of the people who are in the county live actually in the city there really is, intellectually, no reason for county government. As I understand it, and this happened while I was gone, I believe that the legislature did approve consolidation on a local option basis. I think there is a legal vehicle where this can move forward. As an alternate to that, it is my impression that to a greater or lesser extent both the city and the county have been working on various forms of consolidation. And that's going on today as you noticed in the election that just now took place two days ago with the

candidates in the wings. The winners announced they are going to work on consolidation. I mean I've been hearing this for forty years.

KM: Do you still believe in it? Or are you an opponent of it?

PdW: Oh, absolutely. I mean I don't think taxpayers can afford redundancy.

KM: If they asked for you to sit on a commission to study this, would you do it?

PdW: Well, I guess so, but I mean we don't need more commissions. We just need to have the people who are involved sit down and get in a room and say let's go to work and see how we can do it. It's a hands on, get it done, we don't need to worry about the philosophy or you know, if it's a good idea, this is it.

KM: You were a one-term mayor and you said at some point that you felt that we should do what we could do and then get on with our lives. Is that why you decided not to run again?

PdW: No, not at all. First of all, one term isn't enough. Two years isn't enough. I'm a strong believer in four-year terms and I'm a believer in city manager form of government. This is a \$500,000,000 year business and it's ridiculous to turn that over to people making \$35,000 a year. I mean it doesn't make any sense.

KM: Was it that big of big of a business then?

PdW: Well, obviously not but say it was 250,000,000 then it was half the size. The pay in those days for the mayor was \$800 a month, which is irrelevant. I was asked to come out and become CEO of the Bekin public company. They offered to acquire my company in exchange for stock that was a business opportunity. I was how old was I? Let's see it was '71, I was 41. I couldn't afford for my family's sake not to take advantage of it. So I decided to finish my term and accept the

offer strictly for business reasons. I love politics. I would love to run again. I probably would have enjoyed going to the state legislation even maybe more than that but I couldn't afford it in those days.

KM: How involved are you still in our local politics?

PdW: Not very.

KM: Not very? Would you like to be more involved?

PdW: I mean I'm very involved but I'm not involved in politics. I try to do a little work with big influence unpublicized, quiet.

KM: I've always heard of the good old boy lunches where people meet and you see a bunch of them going to a lunch.

PdW: I think that's more fiction than fact today. At one time, I think it was more fact than fiction. Today, I think it is more fiction than fact to be honest.

KM: So you don't go to any of these good old boy lunches.

PdW: That doesn't mean that there aren't two or three people who get together at lunch once and awhile. This is certainly not a formal situation. People who occupy positions that [sometime] require them to get together but in general there is no such thing.

KM: What was your business experience in California like?

PdW: I enjoyed California very much. I loved it then and I love it today. It's a very dynamic canvas. Los Angeles, you know, California, first of all, has the seventh largest gross national product in the world. If it were a separate country, it would be seventh in GNP. It had 23,000,000 people when we arrived. It has about 31 and a half [million] today. Southern California is the business dynamo that

drives the state. It's both the country's third largest city as well as one of its wealthiest. It draws people who are accomplished and intelligent, who can do and are aggressive. It is anything you want so the climate is one that is very receptive to new ideas and forward thinking. It is just exciting. I mean it's a great place—earthquakes aside.

KM: What brought you back to El Paso then?

PdW: A couple of things. I retired then at age 69 from my corporate responsibilities. I love El Paso. I have deep roots here. My wife is a fourth generation [El Pasoan]. We love the desert southwest. You can live anywhere today and you can go anywhere. We do go everywhere. We just thought this would be a great place to come back to and we've meet lots of old friends from many years ago.

KM: Where are your children nowadays and what are their names?

PdW: My youngest son graduated with a Ph.D. in psychology from UCLA and he was a psychologist for seven years, very successful. He is now finishing his third year at the school of theology at the University of South Swanee becoming an Episcopal minister.

KM: And his name?

PdW: His name is Robert de Wetter. My middle son, David de Wetter, who graduated from Cla<sup>l</sup>remont and got his MBA at Duke University is a consultant in New York City and lives in Connecticut. Our oldest son, Charles, is president of De Wetter Hovious Caldwell Bankers for the state, here in El Paso and New Mexico. He graduated from SMU where he met his wife. They live here and have three

children and Robert and his wife have a daughter now, six months old so we now have four grandchildren.

KM: Your most recent role that I know of here in El Paso is as a major supporter of UTEP and of their Development Program. How did you become involved in that? As I understand, you are not a graduate of UTEP but your wife is. And what was it like recently to be honored by having a building named for the two of you over there?

PdW: You asked about three different questions.

KM: I'm sorry. I shouldn't do that.

PdW: I was asked in 1990 to join the Development Board, which I did. In about 1992 or 93, some of us on the Board thought that we should take a look at non-state funding for this institution. So we created an endowment committee. I was asked to chair it. That started about a year and half to two year study of funding and that led to the Legacy Campaign which as you know is a \$50,000,000 campaign—the first in the history of the University. That would triple the endowment of this University which stood at about \$25,000,000 when we started. For some reason, they asked me to chair that effort. That, of course, stands at over 45,000,000 now. We are well on our way to reaching our goal. It is something that I can get my teeth into. I feel like I can make a contribution. I've enjoyed it. I've loved it. I really have. I do some other things beside UTEP. We have just created the El Paso Museum of Art Foundation. As you know, the El Paso Museum of Art is a municipal museum. We want to insulate that museum from the vagaries of the city budget process. The only way to do that as far as

the collections, lectures and shows that kind of thing is to create an endowment. The income of which will go to the museum and I'm happy to be chairing that effort. I'm also on the board of the Chamber of Commerce Foundation, which is a very active foundation showing what a variety there is in El Paso. I still do some consulting work in California. I just retired from my last board. So I have a very busy life. Now you asked me, I'll tell you how I heard about this. I was in Tennessee visiting. We were visiting my son when there was a recorded message from Ken Flynn on Robert de Wetter's answering machine saying that "the Board of Regents had just voted to name a building for you, would you call me?" I have known Ken Flynn since I was mayor and I thought he was kidding me. So that's how we heard about it and we were very surprised and very honored and also very pleased.

KM: What are your future plans? Are you going to stay on these three endowment type functions that you are doing here now?

PdW: Well, you know, I certainly intend to finish up the Legacy Campaign, which will take us to the year 2000. I certainly intend to spend some time at the museum. I am a firm believer in the arts. I think quality of life issues enter into our total package here that we use to attract people. So that interests me a great deal. I know I'll continue to do that. The foundation at the Chamber is a three-year term and if I am asked which I probably won't be, I'd be 81 at the time, but if I am asked I would probably agree to serve. I enjoy being active and I like reaching out. I like people. So, I have no grandiose plans. We love to travel around the world.



KM: With the Legacy Campaign is that the one sponsored by Coca-Cola? If it is how did you get them involved?

PdW: Well, fifty million dollars is a lot of money. One of the things I am proudest of, which does not answer the question but is that a great deal of that money has come from El Paso, which El Paso never thought [it could do]. Think of what a success that campaign will say to El Paso about itself because everybody says that you can't do it. It can't be done. El Paso is poor. I can't give you exact numbers but a significant percentage of this money has come locally. Have we gone after foundations? Yes. Are we going after corporations? Yes. Coca-Cola is just one of numbers of corporations that are helping us and that is a matching situation which is a million dollars, I think we have to raise a third. I don't get into details. If you get into details and you are wrong, you confuse everybody but it is a matching program. Coca-Cola Atlanta, their home office, is the one that is partnered with UTEP so it is a very positive matching step for them. It is and continues to be very successful. We are reaching or exceeding our goals. It is a three-year program. Now we are going around for a second time because they love UTEP and we love them but there are many other partnerships of one kind or another involved. The bulk of the money has come from individuals and some corporations that are local.

KM: Can I take you back through history now? When you were the young Peter de Wetter in the school before your parents returned to the States and all, what was a day like in your life?

PdW: First of all, I was the only American in the school. It was physically very demanding. We got up at five in the morning. We did calisthenics (exercises), took a shower at six, had breakfast sitting on benches from six to seven, class work was from about 7:45 to noon, lunch, body contact sports for three hours, homework and to bed. I'll give you an example, which gives you sort of the flavor. This school was located about eight miles from the city of Maresborg, which was on Lake Constance, which is on the German/Swiss border. It is up in the mountains. It is an old castle or series of castles. I can remember one day I was playing. I was throwing a ball and I threw the ball through the window. It broke. I [only] was seven. They made me measure the window. They made me walk to the village to get a piece of replacement glass, walk back and I was coming back, I remember this as though it were yesterday, you went through woods, this was rural. It was wintertime. I slipped and fell and the glass broke. There was nothing to say. I had to go back again and get a second piece. It was this sort of thing you know so it was rigorous. It was demanding. It was difficult. It was a terrific experience—just terrific.

KM: So it helped make you the man you are today?

PdW: Well now certainly it was a strong influence. I can remember when my wife and I went back to visit the school a number of years ago. One of the masters as they were then called was showing us around and we were walking along and we were talking and it turned out that he was a captain in the German Army in the Battle of the Bulge. I had been a captain in U.S. Army in the same thing and here we were walking along fifteen years later talking about the school.

KM: The world is a lot smaller than we think, isn't it? O.k. Let's take you through time, I'm not going to ask you for the war experience because we went through that probably the day at Buchenwald, the wrong turn was one of the worst days in there. But let's go to when you were mayor. What was it day in the life of Mayor de Wetter like?

PdW: I took life seriously. I took the job seriously. I worked very hard. It was really seven days a week. In those days and even today, a mayor, because of the way were accustomed to in El Paso, is considered to be everybody's property so that [there were] constant meetings, ribbon cuttings, social events, speaking engagements, meeting with constituents, meeting with department heads. It was probably (I don't want to overstate it) a fourteen hour day typically seven days a week. My wife was terrific. She speaks Spanish fluently. She is a very gracious person and we did this as a team. I'm convinced that she was helpful. I was elected by a simple majority. There was no run-off. The two other people that I was running against both spoke Spanish fluently. I'm a Yankee and you know to have a Yankee come to Texas was a little bit unusual. I was able to communicate with a lot of the people; in fact, I was endorsed by *The Prospector*, which is kind of unusual. For some reason, I was able to connect with people and they believed me, I guess.

KM: When you speak of your wife you actually glow and I saw the two of you together the night the building was named. Is this the best move you made in your entire career?

PdW: Oh, sure. We've been married you know 55 plus years. No greater blessing.

KM: And you made that decision based on a name? The first call?

PdW: Well, I made that decision on a week's acquaintanceship. It started with the name right.

KM: That's interesting. Is there anything else you would like to have in the interview?

PdW: Not really. I think we have covered a great deal probably more than most people care about.

KM: You have seemed very comfortable with this and I appreciate all the time you've given me and your patience.

PdW: It's my pleasure and I hope that project goes well that you reach your goals with it.