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Interview no. 1719

Gilbert LImon

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Gilbert Limon

Interviewer: Alejandro Garcia

Project: Asarco

Location: El Paso, TX

Date of Interview: March 16, 2019

Terms of Use: Unrestricted

Transcript No.: 1719

Transcriber: Roberto Cristoforo

Summary of Interview:

His Name is Gilbert Limon “Wally” he was born in El Paso, Texas on August 29, 1957, he grew up in Canutillo that used to be a small town at the exit of El Paso, he graduated from high on 1976 and then he stated working at ASARCO when he was 19 years old from 1977-1999. He was amazed when he first started working in there because there was a lot of people working in there and, they will work like 40-60 hours a week. He first started as a minimum wage employee with 7 dollars an hour and then they will be raised 30 cents more every time he changes position on the plant. His first job in the plant was at the land department where he was an operator and he was moved to the cooper department where he pulled out the slag from the mountain as well as a tapper and they worked at the river pulling out matte that is a non-pure cooper. He says that he had a lot of different experiences working in there as well as a lot of knowledge that he gained working in there in different positions. He was that before they closed the plant there were around 1500 workers but after they closed the number of employees reduces to 400. While he was working in the plant, he got a job inside the plant melting the metals, and the temperature was around 2300 degrees, “it was like working with lava “he said. He says that the safety measurements, on the 70s, at the plant weren’t good but not good enough to protect they workers from all of the chemicals that they used in that plant, they had safety measure for the dust but not for the gases that could potentially intoxicate their employees. The safety measurements changed at the 80s because now they had masks or how they called respirators with a respirator that helped them to breath. The masks or respirators continued to update while he was working in there until they had a mask that

can protect you from gases, chemicals and dust. Working in there he experienced 4 accidents in witch the 4 of them were deaths, one of them died on the roasters and in that site of the plant the heath could kill you immediately, when some one died they closed that departments for 1 or 2 days in order to clean, the employee who died in there he died crushed by a machine and from the other 3 accidents he wasn't there but he heard about them. He says that the supervisors were good, but he cannot complain, because he had no problem at all with him and he says that only some of the supervisor's care about the safety of the workers. He was part of the union where they could get 2-3 days off thanks to that union, but he didn't really used that union but there were people that used a lot. When he worked in ASARCO all the employees had insurance for accidents and it covered the 100% of the expenses and they received 2 checks peer week and he could not complain because it was a good job. He retired with a pension, that he says that the retirement could be at the ages from 55-65 that was depending on each person decisions. He says that when he was working on a site that produces chemical gases he will need to go out in order to take a breath because there were no masks or respirator but once they had those respirator it was easier to breath, and there was sites where it was almost impossible to have that respirator because the temperatures were so high that it could burn your face and it makes it extremely hard to breath, but he couldn't complain because he had a family and they pay him really good so he couldn't quit. When he first started working in ASARCO they didn't provide any type of protective equipment such as jackets, pants, gloves, mask, etc. so they needed to take their own equipment but at the time of getting in to their home to wash the equipment is was all contaminated from the chemicals that the plant was using at the plant they only provide them with showers but not washer machines to clean their clothes before going into their homes. He says that you needed to get use to it because ASARCO was your second home because you could be from 8-16 hours a day because if your partner didn't show up you needed to stay 2 shift instead of 1, if you showed up to your regular shift there was no problem if you worked for 3 shifts or the 24 hours of the day. The longest he would stay on the plant was 32 hours in order to get some rest and get the next day to work. Their family didn't have any problem of he stays 32 hours working on the plant. He says that he does not know much about the cemetery called calavera because he was from other part of the city, but he knows that they buried people that lived in that side of the city. He says that as an overall he thinks that the future generations wouldn't work in there because it was an extremely hard job and it could have many risks, and the chemicals could kill you and the plant produced a lot of contamination as well as dangerous gases and chemicals that still can be at El Paso soil. He says that the workers were Mexicans the majority and there was Americans and Afro American people working in there as well and almost everyone spoke Spanish. He also shares the schedule they had at their shifts at the plant and they were from 7am to 3 pm, 3 pm to 11pm and 11pm to 7am, the full 24 hours the plant was working including Christmas and new year. He has a heath issue related to the years he worked in there, he has a condition called Copd which means that his lungs are full of smoke due to the exposure he had on the plant and he also needs surgery on one of his arms due to all of the manual work that they did in ASARCO.

Length of interview 49 minutes

Length of Transcript n/a