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Interview no. 1720

Ismael Ortega

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Ismael Ortega

Interviewer: Mark Calamia

Project: ASARCO

Location: El Paso, Texas

Date of Interview: April 14, 2019

Terms of Use: Unrestricted

Transcript No.: 1720

Transcriber: Roberto Cristoforo

Summary of Interview:

His name is Ismael Ortega he was born on July 7, 1946 and raised in El Paso where he attended school, he went to El Paso high for High School. Her mother was a servant for George Dickenson, and they will live at his house where she worked. He started working in ASARCO when he was 25 years old on the year 1974 on the moth of July. He worked at the plant because he wanted to have a good future for his family, and they had good benefits, so he decided to work there. His first job at ASARCO was at the zinc department and later he moved to the cooper belt department then to the convertors department where he worked for at least 20 years. He describes his different positions starting with the zinc department where they use a kill with a motor that goes around the heat and that was the process that you needed to do in order to get the zinc, but when the motors were not enough they used hammers and they will be hammering in the intense heat for hours and it was really risky because you can burn yourself or how he call it `cook yourself`. He worked in ASARCO since July 1974 to the year 1999 where the plant let him go and during that time, he had different jobs. He had a job in other departments for example being at the ovens, unloading, water department where they treat the water from the river in order to use for the plant. He says that his part for the smelting process was at the cooper belt where they use trans that they unloaded to

treat the cooper where in the proceed they roast it and they was cool in the river, and what he did was feed the convertors with air so that the machinery could keep working. While he was working in there they had safety meetings in the morning so that they could be advice of the potential risks at their job and these meetings could be every 6 months and he says that they were good meetings because you never know if you are coming out alive so you need those safety measures. In all of the years he has worked in there he has experienced a lot of accidents and some of them end up in deaths for example he tell the story that one day when his shift was over he was getting out of the showers with a lot of workers, he hear some one screaming, and what he noticed was that the man that screamed had been cut in half by the train that transported materials, and other accidents he experienced where that at the melting department and there was a man that got burn 40% burn and the name of that man was willy, and what happed is that the cables got loosen and hit him pushing him so close to the ovens and got burn. He also says that sometimes the workers where really aggressive with the new workers because they thought that the new guy will remove them form his position, so what they did is that they didn't teach anything to the new guy they said let him learn by him self because when you where new you were not told how to do the job. He was part of a union called steel workers, he says that at the union they sometimes have your food, but not that much they gave them a piece of cheese, beans and rice. When he was part of the union he had an issue because he was being blamed for something he didn't do and he also says that it wasn't fair or that the union didn't did what they were supposed to do because even the workers paid to have that union and it was not good at all. The bio hazard that ASARCO had were big enough to kill people so that why they needed to use a respirator or a mask, but he also says that the plant didn't care much about their safety because that respirator could melt in your face with the heat of the ovens, but sometimes they couldn't breath because od the respirator and the heat combined with all of the sweat makes it extremely hard to breath, and they needed to go outdoors in other to get some air. He had good and bad experiences on his life and he is telling a story of a dads friend that used to work in ASARCO too and he needed to left because he was having trouble with the unions as well as with the plant. He also played base ball at the park of the plant with the team called cooper labor and wolf pack was another team that he played with and they had uniforms and until today he keeps a jacket from where he used to play baseball. He will attend a church called Cristo Rey that was on top of the mountain and they will go once in a week because it was a promise that you did with God, and that also attended to the mass on Cristo Rey. He says that he knows la Calavera which is a cemetery in El Paso and they even played baseball on there because it was a very united community. The people from that community that dint work in ASARCO, will take lunch every day to their relatives such as, husbands, brothers, cousins, sons,

etc. An advice that he will give to people that are exposed to chemicals is to wear respirators and follow all safety measures, so that they can have a good health.

Length of interview 45 minutes

Length of Transcript n/a