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Interview no. 225

Rev. Jesse Munoz

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Rev. Jesse Muñoz
INTERVIEWER: Jim Diaz
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 27, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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TRANSCRIPT NO.: 225
TRANSCRIBER: Jim Diaz
DATE TRANSCRIBED: April 27, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

(Priest.) Born in Juárez, received a scholarship to Cathedral High School, declined. At age 14, he took a bus to New York where he worked for a year. Saved enough money to go to Spain where he was educated. In later years he traveled throughout Europe and then he returned to El Paso. Father Muñoz feels that through unity and education the basic human rights can be channeled equally.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; views on border problems; Green Card workers; Farah Strike.

30 minutes.
12 pages.

D: First of all, let me ask you, where were you born?

M: I was born in Juárez, right across the border, in 1940 during the depression years.

D: Why or what was it that made you come to El Paso?

M: Need. Like everybody else, survival; and so I guess most of us cross the river many times to try and come settle here.

D: How long have you lived in El Paso, or resided here?

M: Since the age of eleven, except for a period [of] seven years when I was gone for some education away from El Paso.

D: Why did you come back?

M: Because it was a mission to me to come back and try to help around in the community, help our people move forward, and repay them for everything they had done for me; coming back to show extreme gratitude to the people from whom I learned the most basic things in life, my human dignity, and my respect for fellow man. And I thought I would come back and help them move ahead.

D: Having Juárez as a sister city, what advantages and disadvantages do you find living in a border city?

M: More than anything else is the economic exploitation of the sister city and of all those about to come across to make a better living. It's just sheer capitalistic exploitation of the lower group and of course laws of such fundamental values as religion, morals, and stuff like that because of the very present needs of survival.

D: What is your opinion of El Paso-Juárez relations?

M: Well, I mentioned that our three basic needs as human beings are need for food, need for shelter, and need for sexual fulfillment.

As we live on the border, of course our need for food increases when we run out of resources because of the over population. And then you do have to kind of prostitute yourself when it comes to that, sell out, work for very unjust, indecent wages as I see it. As long as we have this neighboring city, and that numbers over 655,000 people and only 25,000 jobs are available, and not enough schools (there's more bars than schools) for the children, then we cannot get ahead. And we have an illegal population of close to 75,000 people in the county of El Paso alone. Then because of that, food is not plentiful enough and people are going to be struggling, they will forget the basic laws: "Thou Shall Not Steal." And this is where morally we have a lot to lose. You have of course what you call a "cult compensation" when a worker feels that well, he should be getting \$3.00 an hour and he's only getting \$2.00, so consequently he's going to take from the boss. And the boss knows that they are taking from him so he will condone it and tolerate it and say, "Well I'm not paying them a just wage, but I know they are taking pencils and pens or they are taking baskets of fruit or whatever." And so this I think is a _____, and it is very much against what we would want to see happening, no real honesty; and in the border city as far as need for food is concerned this is a problem we will always have. People are going to cheat out of necessity and they are going to turn against each other because of this particular reason. The other second need we have is the need for shelter. Now we have an immigrant population or a population of residents without documentation that need shelter and they are at the mercy of whoever offers shelter. Then they become enslaved, they become slaves. You have to

think of all the thousands of people that are in hiding that can't go shopping, can't go to a theater, can't even go to a religious service because they are thinking that they will get caught by the immigration department. And this need for shelter of course is not available. Real estate as it is, with the credit system that we have, a lot of people around here have nice homes apparently, but they don't own them. And probably they will die without owning them, and so they live in a nice little house but it belongs to some creditor and they don't have that ultimate satisfaction of calling something their own, "This is my land." I think is the basic in every man, to be able to call something his own, and this comes in childhood. A little kid always plays a lot with a lollipop or a toy and says, "It's mine," because he likes it; "It's mine." All throughout our life we want to call something our own, whether a piece of land that is basic or some affection, "This is mine." We have this urge to call something "mine." So in El Paso, in the area here, there are not too many people that can say "These are my clothes," "This is my furniture," "This is my car." It always belongs to somebody else and that applies to that basic need for shelter or else to feel security for what you should have, not to anybody else, only to yourself. And then the third that is very critical in the border, is the need for sexual fulfillment. That of course can always be exaggerated but because of the fist control of the situation in the border, this is I think characteristic of any border city, in any depressed area where there are financially deprived people that such things as moral values go down the drain. We have all this going on in the border cities where the youngsters, because they can produce the money, you

know you go down there and they don't care if you're fifteen or twenty-five or fifty-five, if you have the money they have the services. So this draws a lot of our kids down there to where they forget that probably this is not absolutely necessary. There is need for sexual fulfillment but more need for sexual control; and this is very much a problem that we have, not only with youngsters, but mostly with married men that go down there because they can get this sexual fulfillment and they know it is a necessity and they think they are cheating. There are over 18,000 registered prostitutes in Juárez, those are the registred ones. So besides the two reasons [this] is the second largest source of income that they have and it poses a problem for our population here. So I would say that we have a tremendous need to educate our people that sex is very important because it is a basic need, but it is not absolutely necessary and it should not be exploited here in town. Now we have this competitive race between Juárez nightclubs and El Paso nightclubs where before you would go to Juárez to see pornographic shows or something; now you find it right here in our neighborhood and residential area because the law doesn't have any strength. There is not enough law enforcement in El Paso and it has been admitted to us by the District Attorney, the Sheriff's Department, and the Police Department--that there is nothing they can do about all the x-rated shows that are going on in town, where a lot of minors go in, 'cause simply the Police Department isn't strong enough. And they should educate themselves to look at the morals of people; what about all the robberies and all that's going on in the city that they just can't control? They don't see anything that they can do in the future to solve this, so it is

completely uncontrolled. I don't say that everybody is going to be affected by it, but definitely it means a lot of money for a lot of avid businessmen that have no concern for the welfare and the well being of the city of El Paso. They're here because they know they can make their money, they can make a fast buck. So these are the three things that are horridly eating away the foundation of society, which is the family. And there is no way we can think of society without good families, without good family life. And since our people are not educated enough, well, they have to work too hard to probably concern themselves of what is happening. Only we as leaders, and we in the church in particular, can do something about it as far as informing people, because we have to tell them what is going on, you see. And I think that anybody that has spent any amount of years in El Paso and has looked around knows that these are the three basic problems, particularly in the city.

D: Your second example, that was need of survival, do you attribute that to the main immigration problem here?

M: Yeah, basically. And the land distribution, the availability of land, so that a man can sow his own crop with seed, and grow his own crops and all that, and that he can become settled. It is only when you become stable in any kind of life situation, that you really care what is happening around. Otherwise you always are a yeoman, and move from place to place and never really care what happens after you leave. So this nomadic experience of life is very strong in El Paso and it is because of the non-availability of land that you can develop for yourself, for your children, for your grandchildren. This is why I think

it is one of the basic problems that we have. And consequently social change will not come about because those probably that are hollering for social change will stay here for six months and then they will move on and holler somewhere else, and they are not really conscious of what it takes to bring about social betterment, social change. The ones that get stuck are those that won the land, those that are trying to develop their land, develop their traditions, and grow roots into a community. Unfortunately these are the people that, as far as our Mexican American population is concerned, will not speak up. Those that have been here longer and that own most of the land will speak up because they have developed the land according to their own standards and all that, and so they are concerned that things will not change because they have a large interest, or a great interest in the community. And this is what we need to do, people to become more stable and to commit themselves to the community and that will help better the community. But since we have very few of them, most of our people are mortgaged for the rest of their lives, for the next 30, 35, 40 years. So you can see that before they finish paying for one car they will buy another one and they will never own that second car; and the same thing with property. They have not realized the value of being in one place and being able to call something their own. These are people that have moved here from the south of México that have no such experience and stability. They have always been immigrants and farm workers.

D: What is your opinion of green card workers here along the border?

M: Well, it is very unfair to the stable population of El Paso because they get their wages here and they don't pay any taxes--probably some income tax-- they go back to México and live more comfortably than our people here. And definitely there should be some legislation to enforce all these people that have green cards to live here and help carry the load. We cannot of course close the border, it's impossible, nothing will solve it, we will always have "mojados" coming across. But now there's a lot of people that have good jobs and they can manage perfectly all right across the border and do not realize that this is detrimental to the rest of the brethren here that have to pay taxes and have to help in community projects. The immigration department knows this, there is thousands of cars every day lined up, they know they shouldn't be residing here but they won't say anything because, of course, it is the establishment that is benefitting from it.

D: Are they allowed in unions?

M: Yes; yeah, they are allowed in unions, but ordinarily they are not concerned because they feel, well, why pay the dues you know, when there is a right to work law and all that and they have nothing to lose. Probably if they belong to the unions, somewhere along the line they could be obliged to the union and be inducted within the union activities, and probably this is why we have a very low percentage of union members that reside in Juárez.

D: Were there any green carders that were employed at the Farah plant?

M: Oh yeah, a large number.

D: Were they in unions too?

- M: Not very many of them. It's very hard to get them to join anything. They are mostly concerned about themselves, and of course they have every right to. They are not community oriented people.
- D: So they weren't that active in the Farah strike.
- M: No.
- D: Exactly, what was the main issue concerning the Farah strike?
- M: Mostly human dignity, respect for the worker. The wage issue was blown out of proportion, but it wasn't that; it was human dignity, that you cannot mistreat a worker to injustice for any reason, and you cannot deprive him of a job because this amounts to economic homicide. When you take a job away from a man that has to provide for five children, let's say average for the Mexican families, then you kill them financially. How is he going to provide for those children?
- D: Why did it take so long for a settlement?
- M: Mostly because there was a lot of misunderstanding. Not everybody wanted to sacrifice. If we had been able to talk everybody into walking out, or strike, then we would have made most of the people to understand that it's worth going hungry and getting persecuted for. Just the same, all they think is, well, I have to pay the rent, I have to pay these bills. And if I walk out, who is going to pay those bills for me. And that's all they think, they don't think about the future. And so this system of course bases itself on that, but they will never make a move. But it has changed quite a bit.
- D: In what way?
- M: In this sense that large numbers have come to realize that only

through a united effort to organize will we bring about a social change, especially in the labor conditions in the southwest, and particularly El Paso. They have come to realize that there is a strength in unity and it is worthwhile going through this kind of pain, because only thus are we going to ever shake up an establishment to where they might come to understand and come to terms, probably make less profit but gain more in respect for the working people. All this is sheer profit-making right now, what we call rugged capitalism, where there is no control of profit making in the country and anybody can do anything under the banner of free enterprize. And since we have a law system that does not favor the people at all, laws are passed on in Washington by those that have the money and the power. They are the ones who talk to our congressman, our representatives, and they subscribe most of the laws that we have, are catering to the powerful financial problem. There is no way that anybody can say that our judicial system in the country favors everyone equally. The laws are not proclaimed for the general public. It is to serve a particular group, and that's the way it is.

D: Not necessarily the Farah plants, everywhere around.

M: Yeah, everywhere.

D: What part did you play in the Farah strike?

M: Mostly we were intrumental in bringing about the strike. It was because we were involved as a church and a lot of people thought well, if the padres think it is all right, it must be alright. If they think we have a right to walk out, then it must be all right,

we'll walk out. And this is where it all started. Of course, we helped them and we gave them everything we could get for them, from food to shelter to legal advice and all that; and this is how they were able to withstand the heat and probably win the entire battle because they knew they had people that were sincere and that would give up anything to help them out. This is the role we had. We were part of a major moral and spiritual force behind the entire struggle that kept them going to the very end.

D: Did it ever turn to violence, the strike?

M: Yes. It was the hardest thing to do to keep it peaceful, to keep it a non-violent movement. There were some of us who of course ran a risk in order to hold people back and in order to kind of veil all the efforts made by the company to bring about violence so that we would be discredited and we would lose the national support. We have 45,000,000 Americans supporting us all over the country, and we were able to get donations up to 5 1/2 million dollars, a half of that through personal efforts of some of us traveling all over the country, seeking financial aid for the people that we have here that were deeply in debt and who had to eat, and their children who were sick not being able [to] get into hospitals and all that. Because of that personal effort we were able to make it. It was not necessarily of the union people, they gave us most of the moral support, great contributions by several unions throughout the continent, but we the people are the ones who had to go about and show that we were united and that we were suffering and that we were just going to hang in there--you

know, live or die. And I think this was the most convincing argument, that we went out there and talked to all these people. We didn't have George Meany, even though he was backing us up; we didn't have anybody else but very simple people that for the first time were fighting the big battle of their lives--the right to speak up and the right to self-defense. They didn't have that before.

D: I thought it was a unionization problem. Wasn't it?

M: No, the union came after. Amalgamated has been in the area for about 17 years, but we have been here for 50 years--our parents, our grandparents--and so we are ones who have the problem. They came much later and tried to help unionize because this is the only way to get ahead here, collective bargaining. The fact that you can unite efforts with somebody else and can stand together and demand their basic rights, to be represented. And to be represented unionwise is just as basic as needing legal advice when you are arrested or something. You all have a right, to call an attorney or lawyer is essential. And in our American system, democratic system, that is not so and we have been deceiving ourselves all this time. When it comes to your job you all have the basic right to be represented by someone of your choice and since this was denied in the beginning by Farah, (he felt that he didn't need such a thing) and people were retrieved to disparity and they didn't believe in their representation, well this is where it all started. They were denied one of their basic rights, that we all have to be represented. And if I don't know English I'll have to find someone that will interpret for me because I'm unable to speak for myself, some-

body is going to have to translate. When it comes to legalities, most people don't have a high school education here in our area. They don't know their basic rights generally and then need somebody to speak for them, and they have an absolute right to choose who is going to speak for them and interpret the laws for them so they can defend themselves. So that was this Farah situation.

D: How did the border influence it?

M: Well, it had these people bussed across the border, and people that need jobs, of course. The minimum wage right now in México is \$3.25 a day, then it was \$2.50 a day. So if you can get people to come across the border and work for \$1.80 an hour, imagine, how are you going to stop them? Can anybody blame them? Even though they were conscious of the fact that they were very detrimental to the situation, they have a need for survival too. And it's the people over here that abuse the situation that are to be blamed, not the hungry; these people that want to make more than what they will ever be able to consume in three lifetimes.

D: Well, that about does it. I want to thank you for your help. You have been more than instrumental in this whole thing.

M: Yeah, well, we've talked about this so many times that there is a lot more we can say, but probably that pertains to some other subject. We have done the right thing and we are very sincere about it. Of course, we've been accused of everything just because we got involved, but probably more of the devil's advocate; but it doesn't matter.