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Interview no. 170

Carl Hertzog

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Carl Hertzog (1902-)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: El Paso and Juárez History '20's and '30's
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 21, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Master typographer and bookmaker.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; job as a printer in the 1920's; Ciudad Juárez during Prohibition.

30 minutes.

13 pages.

CARL HERTZOG

Interview with Mr. Carl Hertzog. University of Texas at El Paso. May 30, 1975. Interviewing, Oscar Martínez.

M: First of all, Mr. Hertzog, I'd like to get some background information. Tell me where you were born, where you're from, and how long you've lived in El Paso.

H: Well, I was born in France; Lyons, France. My parents were American citizens, so I'm an American citizen. Every time I used to go to pay my Poll Tax, they wanted to check "Naturalized Citizen." But I said, "No. If your parents are American citizens, traveling, you're an American citizen."

But, although my mother used to speak French at the dinner table, I'm not a Frenchman, because I was about one month old when I left France. I lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and went all the way through school there. I went one year to Carnegie Tech, but I had to earn my living and work nights, carry a full load with what they called a twenty hour mathematics course. It was one hour every day, but it took you three hours every night to keep up with it. It got too tough, and I quit towards the end of the semester, second semester, because I had a good job in Wheeling, West Virginia as a typographer. I was only 20 years old then. I was good friends with my boss, and we'd go on Sundays, take the inter-urban car down the Ohio River, go through the hills, in the summertime flowers and trees, real nice. But one day, accidentally, I opened the

drawer in the upstairs office, and a letter there...it didn't make my boss a crook, but it made him a "four-flusher." He was putting on a big act, and it hurt me so bad, I wanted to get the hell out of there. I picked up the Inland Printer, which is the trade journal bible of the printing industry, and in the classified there was a little ad that said "Wanted. Layout Man. Mc Math Printing Company. El Paso, Texas." I answered the ad and got the job.

M: What year was this?

H: 1923. It was the first time I was west of Ohio. I went by way of Chicago, to the Rock Island Golden State Limited to El Paso. June, 1923. Boy, it was hot as hell!

M: That's the hottest time of the year, here.

H: I stayed in the hotel near the Union Station for a while, and then I moved to the YMCA. That was before air conditioning, and on the top floor of the old YMCA, boy, you could hardly sleep at night, it was so hot. I'd walk. I didn't know anybody, except my job I had lined up. On a Sunday I'd walk from the YMCA downtown, through this area here, to the Smelter, just for something to do, and explore. I did find a lieutenant out at Ft. Bliss who went to the same high school I did in Pittsburgh. It helped a little bit. We played tennis. But on my job, I was so interested in the job and making good at it, that I didn't pay any attention to El Paso history or any of that. Except I did try to learn Spanish.

M: Why was that?

H: Because...something new on the border, you see.

M: But that wasn't connected with the job?

Hi I didn't have to learn it, but the printers were Mexicans and spoke Spanish. The other day when I talked to you, I didn't think about this, but it might have some bearing. Mc Math was a very progressive printer for being on the border and this far away; and he had an idea that if he had somebody who could write copy, it would help sell printing. So he employed Norman Walker, who had been the Associated Press correspondent during the Mexican Revolution, during the time of Pancho Villa. He knew Villa personally. He didn't know much about printing and layout, but he could write. Mc Math put me in; Walker was my boss. He didn't treat me **very good**; that is, he'd give me bum steers to sell. And he'd give me prospects in South El Paso that didn't buy five dollars worth of printing in two years. But I didn't know the difference; I got discouraged. But here came one day a snappy gentleman named Gonzalo de la Parra. He was secretary to President Obregón, who Walker knew. He wanted to have a book printed. So Walker didn't know anything about layout and making a book, so he turned him over to me. That's when I got interested and tried to learn some Spanish. That book was propaganda against the spirit of revolution, anti-Villa. So they wanted it printed secretly in the United States, and spring it on the public in México later. Since Obregón knew Walker, he sent him to Walker. And Walker turned him over to me.

The title of the book was La lepra nacional. The first chapter was "El tartufo de chocolate," the chocolate soldier. This Gonzalo de la Parra--I didn't know enough Spanish--I didn't know any at that time--so I made a mistake and called him Gonzalo de la Perra! So I learned. He

was a snappy guy, real peppy and well-dressed. He didn't know any English and I didn't know any Spanish, but we got along fine. Now, I could understand him--that's fifty years ago--better than I could understand the natives here, because he enunciated every syllable. For example, the book had a hundred and forty pages. I'd ask the pressman how many pages, and he'd say, "Ciento y cuarenta páginas." And I wouldn't get it. But Gonzalo would say, "Ci-en-to y cua-ren-ta pá-gi-nas." That gives me time to catch up. He'd come in at nine o'clock in the morning or ten, "¿Tiene las pruebas?" "No, señor." "Bueno, mañana." He'd take out in a taxi and come back tomorrow to read the proofs. So that was my introduction to El Paso.

M: The book was printed, though?

H: Yes.

M: And distributed in México?

H: Yes.

M: When was the first time you went to Juárez?

H: Well, it would be about the same time.

M: You remember your initial impressions?

H: Well, I remember... When I moved to the YMCA, which wasn't a very fancy place in those days to live, there was another man living there who worked for some department store. I guess maybe the first Sunday that I was here, we went to the bullfight. Of course, I didn't know anything about it at the time. I knew there would be some noisy "gringos" to cheer the bull and all that stuff, but that's the best bullfight that I ever saw. I never saw one since. By best, I mean the fiesta idea that they had-- what do you call them, the Queen of the Bullfight? The automobile would

come into the bullring with the queen sitting up high with her mantilla and mantones, all dressed up. Lots more "foofaraw" than I ever saw since. It was quite a show. And of course, she'd give the sign and they'd have the trumpets with La Macarena. Of course, later on I got real involved with bullfighting, but that was twenty or thirty years later. What I was telling you the other day, Prohibition was in the United States.

M: Were you anxious to get down there right away with Prohibition on here? You were a young man. I'm sure you wanted to have a good time, at times. Were you anxious to get to Juárez for that?

H: No, not especially. We had some Mexican workmen in the printing shop who lived in Juárez. I guess all of them were bootleggers on a small scale. I used to have one of them bring me a quart of wine. Of course, there was lots of smuggling of liquor on account of Prohibition. One thing that seems significant to me and your study is [that] in El Paso at that time there were no night clubs or cabarets, but one. It was in the basement of the Mills Building. It was called the Modern Café, and it was run by the Roberts brothers. They had good food and an orchestra, and everyone went there on Saturday night to dance. But that was the only place in El Paso like that.

M: But no liquor.

H: No. But you might carry a bottle, from Juárez. (Laughter) At that time, there was nothing on the river like it is today in the way of bars and dance places, and so on. It was all on the 16th of September Street. The best known place was the Centro Café, which was operated by Severo González. It was well known. He knew everybody, like Jack Dempsey, who'd come there. He had the walls covered with autographed photographs. It was a big place

and it had a balcony all the way around and a dance floor in the middle, and tables all around the balcony and downstairs. You'd drive over the Stanton Street Bridge and drive in the back to the big parking lot. Way down there, nobody walked across the bridge in those days, except workmen. Then, in the next corner was The Mint, which was operated by Harry Mitchell. It was not a cabaret, no dancing. But it was a high-class place. Harry Mitchell later bought the old brewery building in El Paso and operated the Harry Mitchell Brewery. He had quite a thing going-- Mitchell Beer. At that time, he lived in the penthouse of the Hilton Hotel. Across the street from Mitchell's was The Big Kid's Palace. I noticed just the other day in the "Twenty Years Ago" or the "Forty Years Ago" it mentioned his real name. I've forgotten it right now. He ran The Big Kid's Palace.

M: Was he an American?

H: Yeah. Of course, all the Americans who had businesses like that over there had a Mexican partner to help with the politics and so on.

M: Was there a law about ownership of the establishments?

H: Yeah, I think so. I don't remember what the law was. But Harry Mitchell had a Mexican citizen who was his partner and the "Big Kid" did too. At one time the Tivoli, not the present Tivoli but the original Tivoli, was a gambling house. It was on the 16th of September Street, catty-corner to the Centro Café, where the streetcar turned. It was a lower level, and I can remember trees that would go down the sidewalk. Of course, it was wide open. Roulette and chuckaluck and everything. But there was a lot of "politicking" going on in those days. The bridge closed at different hours. They'd have the bridge closing at midnight; and then when they

opened up the gambling, the U. S. would change the bridge closing to nine o'clock. There was a sort of battle there of politics and laws.

M: How did the Mexicans feel about that, in Juárez?

H: Well, I don't know. Of course, the gamblers wanted to run. Immigration or Customs would close the bridge at nine o'clock and that'd make a little fuss, discontent, whatever you want to call it. Then in Prohibition, one of the famous whiskeys in the United States was Waterfill and Frazier, Kentucky. Of course, Prohibition ruined their business. They moved all their equipment, formulas and everything, to Juárez. It was operated in Waterfill's distillery. It was owned and operated by Tony Bermúdez and Ricky Flores. There were very nice guys.

M: Did they buy it from the people over here?

H: Yeah.

M: Or did they establish a partnership?

H: Well, for a while maybe Waterfill and Frazier's heirs might have had an interest in the operation. But essentially it belonged to Bermúdez and Flores. As you know, Tony Bermúdez in those days was a handsome Jack with a black moustache, and snappy clothes, and a ladies' man. As you know, he later became the head of Pemex, which was quite a big job for a boy from Juárez, from El Paso. And he made good. It was many years that I didn't see him while he was coming up. Some years back, not too long ago, the Chamber of Commerce had their annual meeting at the Country Club and had him as [their] principal speaker. When he came in, I was horrified! From this black-haired, black-moustached [young man], he had white hair and had aged! But he made good talk and was a smoothie. Enrique Flores died a long time before that. Mrs. Flores is a real nice lady, lives here and

belongs to the Historical Society.

M: Would you consider those days in Juárez as wild days, with the gambling and the drinking and the prostitution, and all that?

H: No, I wouldn't say it was any worse than it is now. Of course, when I used to live on the top of North Stanton Street before they built the Fairmonts, I had an apartment on the second floor. I could see the bullring in Juárez. One time it burned. I could see from my room the bullring was on fire. A bunch of us got together and dashed over there. With the excitement of the bullring burning down, we forgot about the bridge closing at twelve o'clock. [We] came to the bridge and it was closed. So the whole bunch of us, we had to spend the night in Juárez. There weren't any hotels available, so we [went] up the "Calle Diablo" which went up--it started I think--up where the Cathedral is, and angled off. It was pretty dangerous; that was a pretty dangerous street.

M: What kind of place was it?

H: The "Calle Diablo?" Well, just joints all the way up to the outskirts. Of course, La Fiesta was in that neighborhood now, but it was pretty rugged then. I remember a man at that time called Clay Shelton [who said],

"Well, we'd better make friends going up the 'Calle Diablo.'"

He went into a bar and called for drinks on him. It was one o'clock or two o'clock in the morning, [and there were] only two or three people in there. When he announced his buying drinks, boy, they fell in the windows and doors from all directions! Thirty or forty people! Well, I don't know about being wild. I never had any trouble over there. I know people that did; maybe they had it coming to them.

M: What kind of trouble did some of these people have?

H: I mean like arguing with the police, get thrown in jail, something like that. [Pause] I had a thought that might be pertinent. When I was still a baby and came from France, my father had a job as Assistant Head Master of Catskill Heights Military School, which was a very ritzy outfit. It still exists. He got T. B. there, and moved to Albuquerque because of his health. He got worse. Well, I got a pamphlet which is a catalog for summer school for the University of New Mexico in 1904. It has Carl Hertzog, Professor of Music. That's my father. He got so sick, he knew he was going to die, and wanted to go back to Ohio; all for complicated reasons. I think it was because my mother didn't have any money and got a pass, which was somebody else's pass. It was illegal. So in order to use the transportation, we had to go home from Albuquerque by way of El Paso. My mother told me that they had to spend the night in El Paso. They got a hotel room in Juárez, because it was too dangerous in El Paso.

M: What was the year?

H: 1904.

M: It was safer in Juárez?

H: Yeah. That might have been an Easterner's idea, but it could've been true. 1904 wasn't too long after the John Wesley Hardin stuff.

M: How did they do in Juárez? Everything go okay?

H: Well, the details that my mother had when they got home didn't have anything to do with your subject.

M: But that's interesting that they would stay in Juárez instead of El Paso.

H: You might use that in your story! (Laughter)

M: That's very interesting. That's revealing.

H: Well, I can't remember when we stopped going to Juárez. You know,

a bunch of young couples would go to Juárez every Saturday night.

Besides the Central and those places, there was a beer garden; Cruz Blanca, I think. They'd have dancing out there in the summertime, outdoors.

M: When Prohibition ended, and the Depression came, of course things changed quite a bit.

H: Yes.

M: They closed down a lot of places. Do you recall what happened and the impact of that?

H: Well, as I remember, I don't think the abolishment of Prohibition hurt Juárez too much.

M: You don't think so?

H: Maybe over a long period as it built up on this side. It's hard for me to believe how many places there are in El Paso now where you can go dance, cabaret style. Well, there was another place down there on the 16th of September called The Lobby Café. That was Hugo, who has the liquor store now on Stanton Street. When they started opening up right across the Santa Fe Bridge, he had what they called The Lobby #2. It was right on the first cross street after you'd enter...you know where the Centro Café is? The next corner was Lobby #2, Hugo's. He was very popular over there for many years. Well, Severo González got into some kind of political trouble, I guess, and he had to leave Juárez. He had a place out on Alameda for a while. Then he established the Centro, which was near the bridge. He was a loyal customer of McMath, the printer that I came to work for. All his printing was done there for many years, advertising and so forth.

M: There was a period, too, when the Mexican government closed all those places

for reform reasons--the Cárdenas government. Did you remember about that?

H: No. You mean they were trying to clean it up?

M: Clean it up, yeah. One of those reform campaigns.

H: Well, did you ever talk to Dr. Braddy?

M: No.

H: You ought to interview him. You know him?

M: I don't know him.

[WHAT FOLLOWS CANNOT BE USED IN ANY FORM.]

H: Well, he's an English professor and probably the most productive writer on the campus. He's written several books and lots of scholarly articles. He's scholarly and a good talker, and he always looks like he came out of a band box. He wears snappy clothes, looks neat. He's very polite and soft spoken. I shouldn't tell this of him, this isn't for publication. I was shocked when I found out that he was one of these guys that, when he starts drinking, he gets bellicose. He wants to fight everybody! (Laughter) When I get tight I want to go to sleep! (Laughter) But he wants to fight! So, he's been in the Juárez jail several times, and if you'd see him and meet him, you'd never dream it, but he does! We wrote a book, it wouldn't be a full-length book, it could be a study like our Southwest Studies. [He] offered it to us, and I was flabbergasted at what he had in this book about Juárez. He painted a very raw picture; like nine-year-old girls from the interior who walked down the street and would be picked up and given a shot of heroin, and the first thing, they're prostitutes. All the chicanery and dirty stuff, he had it in there, and included an opium den and all the facts about that. It made me mad! I think the El Paso Chamber of Commerce is just

a pimp for Juárez! To increase the traffic; you know about Juárez and the tourist attractions. This picture of the underworld and the dirty part of it was, as long as I'd been here, it was sort of a revelation for me and it made me mad! I wanted to publish it. Dr. Smiley was the President [of UTEP] then; the first time he was President, not the second time.

M: When was that?

H: I can't remember. You could check up on it.

M: Well, I mean just approximately for now.

H: Let's see. -----was gone. I guess Smiley came in 1955, something like that. Then he left here, and then came back again as President. So I took this to Dr. Smiley to get permission to publish it. He said,

"No! That's dynamite! It would cause an international crisis!"

To blackball Juárez like that. He mentioned that he didn't see how Braddy could write such a graphic account of the opium den as he had if he hadn't been there! (Laughter) Why don't you interview Braddy?

M: I didn't know about that.

End Of Interview