

1-30-1973

Interview no. 106

Charles Armijo

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Charles Armijo by Leon C. Metz, 1973, "Interview no. 106," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Charles Armijo
INTERVIEWER: Leon C. Metz
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 30, 1973
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 106
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 106
TRANSCRIBER: Robert H. Novak
DATE TRANSCRIBED: October 4, 1973

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

The Mexican Revolution; early 20th Century El Paso;
old Fort Bliss; growth of the city of El Paso.

30 minutes (3 3/4 tape speed); 12 pages.

Charles Armijo
by Leon C. Metz
January 30, 1973

- M: Mr. Armijo, you said you had lived here for 40 years. Is that in El Paso?
- A: Right here in this house.
- M: Did you live in El Paso earlier than 40 years?
- A: Yes. I've lived in El Paso since 1910.
- M: Since 1910.
- A: They drove me out of México--the Revolution drove me out of México. I was a resident there and I had business there, but I sympathized with the government of Porfirio Díaz. When the Revolution got rough--they were killing people--we all came out. My father, my sister, and my brother, all of us came out of México. And we've lived here ever since.
- M: What business was your family engaged in in México?
- A: In México? In the grocery business.
- M: In Chihuahua City.
- A: In Ciudad Guerrero. That's west of Chihuahua City towards the mountains.
- M: Were the Villistas raiding the store and making it difficult? What made you decide to leave?
- A: Well, it was that or get shot. They shot all the rest of the people that were government people. They executed all of them.
- M: The Villistas did.
- A: The Villistas did. Pascual Orozco.
- M: How old were you at this time, whenever you left México?
- A: About 30 years.
- M: Were you in the grocery business at the time?
- A: I was in the grocery business.

M: How did you come out of México--on a train?

A: I came out on a wagon over the hills, over the mountains. We had to tie the wheels one time in order to be able to go down a slope. But we finally got over and we got to the railroad, the Mexican Central Railroad it was at that time. We flagged the train and it stopped for us and we boarded it. We came to El Paso then. That was about December of 1910.

M: Was there just your family, you and the family, or were there many of you, other families who came along on the buggy too?

A: All the family came at the same time.

M: When you boarded the train did you just sort of pile on, did you have to pay in order to get on the train going north?

A: Yes, we paid the fare.

M: Was it a refugee train, though?

A: /It was/ a Mexican train. It used to be the Mexican Central.

M: How much did it cost? Do you recall, by chance?

A: I don't recollect, but it wasn't very much, it wasn't very much. I don't recollect exactly. Maybe it was about 10 pesos or 11 pesos--something like that.

M: Did the train stop anywhere on the way?

A: Oh, yes, it stopped at the regular stations.

M: But I mean, it wasn't stopped by the bandits.

A: No.

M: What happened when you got to Juárez?

A: Well, we just came over. There were no restrictions then about Mexicans coming over. They were free to come in and go out without any passport, without anything else. Everybody was allowed to go back and forth whenever they

wanted. There used to be a streetcar running--no buses then, but there was a streetcar owned by the Samaniego family. They used to own the streetcars. And we came over on the streetcar.

M: Where did you go when you came over?

A: Well, we came to El Paso.

M: Did you live down in South El Paso for a time?

A: We lived in several places. We lived on Myrtle Avenue, we lived on Montana Street, we lived on Magoffin Avenue, and here on North El Paso. Here's where we've lived most of the time.

M: Did the city or the United States government give you any help? Did they help you find a job or did they give you food?

A: No. I was quite able then. I used to be a good bookkeeper. And I found a job as a pullman conductor. I run between here and Los Angeles, between here and Albuquerque, and several places. They used to switch me around. I was with the Pullman Company for quite some time.

M: Where did most of the refugees who came live--in the same general area? Did they get any help? Were they clustered together?

A: No, they lived wherever they could, but there was no help from anybody. They had to find a job, wherever it was. Some of them found a good job, some had to go pick and shovel, and so forth.

M: Were there any soup kitchens set up anywhere to feed the families who didn't have any food?

A: There was no charity organizations at that time to feed anybody that didn't have food. You had to look out for yourself, and do the best you could.

M: How about the relations between the people who came over and the people over in Juárez? Was the relationship good?

- A: Well, those that were not connected with the Revolution, it was all right. They got along all right and they visited each other, like they always do.
- M: Were you here when the battle of Juárez took place?
- A: Yes.
- M: What do you recall? What did you see?
- A: Well, I watched the battle from the top of the then Sheldon Hotel. I took my field glasses and I watched them fight over there. There were a lot of people killed. Some of the federal soldiers were brought over to this side to take treatment for their wounds. Some of them died, and some of them got well.
- M: Where did they treat the federal soldiers that came over here to get treated for their wounds?
- A: Well, different hospitals. The city government took care of them until they got well.
- M: Did you go to Juárez shortly afterward and see the buildings that had been destroyed?
- A: Oh, yes; after the fighting was over, then everything was peaceful. We used to go over and we used to get along all right. My brother-in-law used to be the city treasurer in Juárez.
- M: What was his name?
- A: His name is Cárdenas, Jorge Cárdenas. He was the treasurer of the city, and he brought over quite a bit of money with him to El Paso. Not very much-- maybe eight or ten thousand pesos, or something like that. Then he moved away from here and went to México and died.
- M: Was this his money that he brought into El Paso?
- A: It was the government's money, it was the city government's. He used to be

the city treasurer.

M: Did he bring it over in order to keep it...?

A: To keep it for them.

M: Right.

A: And he returned it to the government when peace was made. He died shortly after. His widow's still living.

M: How many refugees do you suppose came altogether to El Paso? Do you have any idea?

A: I have no idea--quite a few. There was lots of them. Even the governor of the state, Don Luis Terrazas, came over. All of the rich people, they all came over. Some of them went by Ojinaga and crossed the line at Ojinaga and came over.

M: Did you ever see Don Luis Terrazas?

A: Oh, yes!

M: What did he look like?

A: He was a white man, very, very light complected, and he used a beard, a long beard. Very composed, very smart, very rich. He was very wealthy. He owned a lot of property all over the state--a lot of farms and ranches, cattle ranches. And many, many other things that wealthy people have.

M: Did you learn to speak English in the United States or in México?

A: I learned to speak English in the United States.

M: What was it, when you came across the bridge, that impressed you the most?

A: I was 11 years old when I came over. I went to Socorro, New Mexico, to the College of Mines in Socorro, New Mexico, and there I graduated.

M: This was before you came out of the Revolution, though. I thought you said you were about 30 whenever you came. How old were you when you came out from

the Revolution?

A: 1910...I was 29 years old.

M: Oh, then you had been to the United States earlier and gone to school.

A: Oh, yes, I went to school here when I was a child.

M: What were your impressions of El Paso whenever you came through at 11 years old?

A: I was from a small town, and everything was wonderful and interesting. Because the town where I was born is just a little town of about 3,000 inhabitants, and there isn't much there. There wasn't anything there at that time. We had no telephone, we had no telegraph... Yes, we had telegraph, but no telephone.

M: What did El Paso look like when you came out from the Revolution?

A: Very pretty.

M: Where did the town extend to?

A: The town was not very big then. I imagine the El Paso population then was about 20,000 people.

M: Before we go on, you mentioned the Samaniego family owning the streetcars.

A: They owned the streetcars, the Samaniego family. Mariano Samaniego was the name of the owner.

M: Did he live in El Paso or in Juárez?

A: He lived in El Paso and Juárez both.

M: Do you remember much about the family?

A: Oh, yes, yes.

M: I have never heard of this particular family and was very curious about them. What did Mr. Samaniego look like?

A: Well, when I knew him he was a man of about 60 years old, white complexioned.

I don't know how else to describe him to you. He was the average looking man.

M: How many streetcars were there? Do you have any idea?

A: Well, there were mule driven cars--there's one of them still here at the Plaza. And people used to sit on the sides, they had benches on the sides, not across the streetcar. Old style.

M: Where did they keep the corrals they kept the mules in?

A: They kept them in Juárez.

M: Was there just one place in Juárez that they kept the mules?

A: I don't remember. It was a Mexican concern, owned by Mr. Samaniego--by old man Samaniego--and everything came from Juárez. Juárez and El Paso was just one town then. No restrictions, no passports of any kind.

M: Mr. Armijo, when did you first go out to the Hacienda-old Fort Bliss site?

A: I bought that place about 50 years ago.

M: Had you been out there earlier?

A: Oh, yes.

M: Did you recall when the families used to live in the Hart's Mill, or in the hacienda, where the Hacienda Café is now?

A: The man who owns the Hacienda Café lives there now. I forget what his name is.

M: Oh, Mr. López.

A: López. He's been there a long time.

M: Did you know Mr. Hart, Juan Hart, before him?

A: Juan Hart? Yes, I knew him before he died.

M: Did he live in the same building that Mr. López lives in now?

A: Yes.

M: What did Mr. Hart look like?

A: Juan Hart, when I knew him, was a man about 50 or 60 years old. He used to own the Morning Times, the newspaper. Very rich man--he was a wealthy man.

M: Was he a likeable individual? Did most people like him?

A: Yes, yes. Very much so.

M: I understand that his father, Simeon Hart, was buried on the grounds. Was the body removed later on? I don't see a gravestone.

A: That I don't know.

M: Do you remember when the dam--not the American Dam or the International Dam, as they call it, but do you remember the rock dam that used to be across the Río Grande?

A: Well, there was two dams. There was the Elephant Butte Dam and then there was one below--the Caballo Dam, I think they called it.

M: Do you ever remember seeing the old mill where they ground the corn and the wheat?

A: No.

M: Mr. Armijo, this is a map of the old Fort Bliss. These are the two apartment houses that you own, the officers' quarters. Do you recall the other two being there, the other two buildings, officers' quarters, that looked just like these two, that were there?

A: Officers' quarters? No, I don't remember them.

M: This is a map, incidentally, of the old Fort Bliss in 1893. It's a government map. How about the stables or the old hospital--do you remember the old hospital?

A: No, I don't.

M: They show a hospital over here now where the old Globe Mills is also. I wasn't aware of one being there.

A: No, I don't remember that.

M: According to some things I've read, there used to be quite a large bluff. You used to be able to really look down on the river. Do you recall being able to over look the river from that particular area?

A: Well, there used to be a bridge over the canal.

M: Where was the bridge?

A: Right in front of my building. The bridge went over the canal and then into the river. People used to smuggle. They used to come over without passports. There used to be a regular way to come over without seeing the inspectors.

M: Was it a bridge that one walked across or could you bring a wagon across it, too, or an automobile?

A: The bridge was over the canal, but not over the river. People used to wade the river, then cross the canal.

M: I don't remember when the canal was built. I don't suppose you recall the canal being built either, or even the American Dam.

A: No, I don't remember.

M: How long has this old house right here been sitting up on the bluff?

A: This house was built by a young man by the name of Wals, Harry Wals.

M: The piano company Wals?

A: Yeah. He built this house when he married. He sold it to somebody else and then I bought it from them. We've lived here ever since, and we hope to be here a long time.

M: I would hope so, too. Do you remember Stormsville?

- A: Yes. And I remember Judge Storms very well, I knew him quite well. Right over there there used to be a lot of shacks there, and old buildings. Finally they tore them down and built good buildings. Kern used to be the owner of those hills, a fellow by the name of Kern. That's why they call it Kern Place. That's what I remember.
- M: How did Stormsville get started? Why something out here on the mesa when there was nothing anywhere around?
- A: There was a lot of shacks; Mexican people used to build their shacks there. They used to rent them the ground for almost nothing and they lived there, built their own shacks, and lived there for a long time until Mr. Kern came. He was in Alaska, I believe, and he came back and he claimed his property and the court gave him the right /to/ the property--took it away from Mr. Storms.
- M: And then Mr. Kern forced all those people to move.
- A: Yes.
- M: How did they get water up there on the mesa?
- A: They didn't have water. They took it in barrels.
- M: From downtown--brought it in mule-drawn barrels up on the mesa there.
- A: Yeah.
- M: About how many people lived over there in Stormsville, would you say?
- A: I'd say about five hundred.
- M: Where did they work for a living, most of them?
- A: They worked all over town. Some of them worked for the city, some worked--different places, wherever they could.
- M: Would you describe them as law-abiding people by and large, or was there a lot of stealing that took place and a lot of trouble?
- A: Oh, no, they were honest people, hard workers. Some of them worked for the

city's garbage company, or wherever they could find work. Farms--they used to work at the farms and so forth.

M: Do you remember when the Scenic Drive was built?

A: Yes.

M: Where did they start--on this side of the mountain or on the other side?

A: They started on the other side of the mountain--McKelligon Canyon. (Chuckles)
I have a hard time remembering--I'm pretty old, you know. I'm 91. I still drive my car.

M: Do you get around much?

A: No, I don't dare drive very far. I just go to get the groceries, maybe go get some drugs--but I never go out far from town. I'm afraid.

M: Why are you afraid?

A: Well, I'm old, you know, and can't see very well. Ninety-one years old is nothing to laugh at. Very few people drive a car when they're 91 years old. I bet you there isn't half a dozen people here in El Paso who drive after they're ninety-one.

G:* Mr. Armijo, when you came to El Paso during the Revolution, were you planning on staying here or were you planning on going back to México?

A: Well, we planned to go back to México.

G: What made you stay here?

A: Because we liked it here, and we made a living here.

G: Didn't you miss your old town of Guerrero?

A: Yes, we missed it a lot. But we got settled here, I got working. I found a job with the Pullman Company, pullman conductor, and different kinds of jobs. I got married after I came out of México--my present wife, I married her here in El Paso. My children were born here. They're all American

*Cristina García

citizens.

M: Did most Mexican people who came out during that time stay or did most of them go back after the Revolution?

A: Most of them went back.

S:* You mentioned that Juárez and El Paso were practically the same town, that people could cross very easily. When did that start to change? When did they have to start with the passports?

A: Let me see if I can remember. (Chuckles) I believe it was about 20 years ago, as far as I can remember. I can't remember a lot of things.

M: Mr. Armijo, we're just about out of tape. We appreciate this talk very much. Mr. Armijo, we're very grateful.

*David Salazar