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Interview no. 49

Rev. B. M. G. Williams

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Rev. B. M. G. Williams
INTERVIEWER: Wilma Cleveland
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 30, 1968
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: _____
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 49
TRANSCRIBER: _____
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former Rector of St. Clement's Episcopal Church.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Characteristics of the city of El Paso around the turn of the century;
development of the city and St. Clement's.

Transcript; 6 pages.

The Reverend B.M.G. Williams
Rector Emeritus of the Church of St. Clements

interviewed by Wilma Cleveland
August 30, 1968

We would like to ask you some questions about your life in El Paso.
What did El Paso look like when you first came?

The only way to describe it so that you best could understand is that El Paso, today, is like a paradise in comparison to what it was when I first came. Now you know that the word paradise is a perfect word meaning very beautiful. That's the real picture to give you because it's so vastly different. It was quite a good size place, 12,000 to 15,000 people but the only words that you can really use to describe it was that it was pretty lonely.

Did people have spiritual problems then like they do now?

Oh yes, you always have those all your life. El Paso was a wide open city, as they call it. The economy seemed to be based on saloons and gambling.

That kind of made a lot of work for you.

No, you see, I wasn't in the ministry then. (This machine is unfamiliar to me. You see, I never did dictate anything. I always wrote everything in longhand. I can't use a typewriter today.) I was only 18 when I came here in 1894. That station was on Stanton Street along what afterwards became the railroad running through the town but the station itself was right on Stanton Street.

Were the streets paved then?

No, there was no paving then, no sidewalks either. Downtown, there were some wooden sidewalks in some places, but in the whole town there wasn't any pavement at all or any sidewalks up into the residences. Anyway, it was a pretty hard looking place. That's what I'm trying to get over.

Is it true that the river was not in the place where it is now?

That I can't say. Yes, it was in the same place. I think that it has always been there. That was long ago that discussion about cutting a new channel. The river was in the same place but it went out of bounds and that's what caused all this about the Chamizal. The city of Juárez was much larger than El Paso in those days. There were trees but no flowers in El Paso; nobody raised flowers. I wondered why. I came to my aunt and uncle's; that's all I had to come to in El Paso. They told me that they just wouldn't grow because it was too hot and there wasn't enough water, etc.. They brought in Deming water in a tank for drinking. Of course, one could use the water for drinking. The water was piped in. There was a water works here. It wasn't in the city. It was owned by a private company. It was piped into the residences. It was supposed to be sort of purified but it wasn't too well done, I guess. A lot of people used ollas with wet gunny sacks around them to cool the water. The water was not too good. That's the only thing.

How did they bring the water from Deming?

They brought it in a tank and I think that they sold it for five or ten cents a bucket. That was pure water, plenty of it. It still is, clean, pure water from this tank. Granted, it was palatable. The river water wasn't too good, naturally. Of course, they did

a certain amount of purification but it wasn't good enough. When it rained, which was not too often, the downtown streets would be running; there was no pavement. I remember the Popular windows when the buggies would go by, they would splash the mud all over them and everybody would run for safety when they saw the buggies coming because you would get covered with mud.

What was your work at that time?

I was just a night clerk at the hotel. That was my first job. The hotel has long been torn now. It was where the newspaper office is; it was the Walker Hotel. I was a night clerk for just a few months because things were awfully dead. Then what they called Cox's Army passed through here on their way to Washington to get the attention of the government. They wanted help because it was the depression. It was a bad one in 1893. We had to feed these people and give them enough food to get to the next town. Things were really quiet, dull, very difficult to get work of any kind. That fall, I went to work for a very fine grocery store in those days. It was called Watson's Grocery and I stayed there for quite a long time. Afterwards, I went to Arnold and Company when they opened their plant here, the branch packing house. Armor had one and Swift had one. That was the days just before Peyton Packing Company came into existence, the same place; now the Rainbo Company has it. It has been sold to them.

What did you do in the summertime?

That was even before they had these water coolers. We just put up with it, that's all. Then someone devised these water coolers and of course they were very effective; but that was years after I

came here. Before, we didn't have anything. Lots of people would use gunny sacks; wet them and hang them by the window so that the wind would blow through them and as long as the water was in then it was cool. When they dried out, then, of course, you had to wet them again. This was very time consuming and bothersome. I always wanted to be a minister so I studied under a local minister, a retired clergyman. Let's go back. First of all, I was what they call a lay leader. He takes the part that he can in the service; he can't take all of it because that is reserved for the priest to do.

You want to go back to old El Paso?

The time I was telling you about back there, El Paso was a wide open city with gambling and saloons; that seemed to be the economy. They determined that they had to get rid of gambling. They did, about two or three years after I came here. I guess that long before that they had been agitating about that.

May I ask you why they did that?

The people in town didn't want the economy built up on that. People didn't seem to want to stay in a town that had gambling and saloons. It was all right in those old wild days; that was what it was all about. So when it started becoming a family town they knew that it was wrong so they decided to get rid of it. In fact, they had open prostitution. It was very flagrant.

At the same time that they closed the saloons, they closed prostitution?

Yes, but I don't want to bring that in. Sure they did. It was down on Mesa Avenue below Overland Street.

Tell me about the gambling. What kind of people gambled?

Well, the citizens, of course. That love of gambling is inherent in most men. Today they are doing it, horseracing. But, this is so different. It was that here was a saloon and next to it was a gambling house. The whole town seemed to exist on it. Of course, they had stores, nice stores, grocery stores, even one or two furniture stores, even in those days. There were many killings then; there were many men who held grudges. But there were also many fine families here: doctors, lawyers; and there were churches. Saint Clements is the oldest. In 1970, we will celebrate our 100th anniversary. It's the oldest protestant church. It's a beautiful church and it's going to be more beautiful; they're going to put in some new stained-glass windows and new side doors. I became a lay reader in 1900, officially. I've been connected with the church for all those years since 1900. First, I was a deacon and then a priest. Then I was rector and now my title is Rector Emeritus. I did this because I loved it. This has been my life. In 1951, we sold the rectory and I got an office up here. My life has been wonderful and happy. I've seen the town grow and develop in the right way. The town has come alive; it is the best climate anyone would want. It's a privilege to live here and it's the people who make a place. They are just wonderful here; they welcome visitors nicely and newcomers are surprised at how friendly we are. The climate must have something to do with it. People are just glad to live here. I have a beautiful garden with roses and trees and I love it. The soil is so rich in the valley. We have a great industry and the cattle and clothing industry. I've seen El Paso grow from a raw town to a polished city. I've lived a very happy and I hope, a very useful

life here. I am 93 years old and all my dreams have come true. Even when I was a child, I wanted to be a minister. When I came here, all the society business was carried on in Juárez, people went over there for social events. There was always wonderful relations between the two countries.

Who was the minister when you came to El Paso?

I remember well, it was Cabell Martin. He was rector then.