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Interview no. 133

Walter D. Thomas

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Col. Walter D. Thomas
INTERVIEWER: Robert H. Novak
PROJECT: El Paso History; the Mexican Revolution
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 6, 1974
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Member of Pershing Punitive Expedition into Mexico
in 1916.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Experiences with the Pershing Expedition; Dean Eugene
Thomas of the College of Mines (his brother); early
El Paso and Fort Bliss.

1 1/4 hours (1 7/8 tape speed); 14 pages.

Interview with Colonel Walter D. Thomas by Robert H. Novak on June 6, 1974.

N: Colonel Thomas, why don't you give us a little bit of biographical background on yourself?

T: I was born in Tampa, Florida on April 17, 1895. I went to school in Tampa until 1910 or so. My father had a blacksmith shop and a carriage works in Tampa. He was an expert in wrought iron work. He did a lot of the wrought iron in the interior of the Catholic Cathedral in Tampa. He knew nothing about his parents except for the fact that he was nine years old when the Civil War ended. He was then living in North Florida. I know there were thirteen children in his family. I only met part of them before I grew up. Papa's health broke down because he had asthma. The doctor advised him to give up his business, which he did. We then moved to the west side of Tampa Bay to a little place with a post office and a general store, called Safety Harbor. About a mile south of the post office was a huge orange grove. There were eight different springs in the bay. Each had some sulfur in it, but the sulfur content in each spring was different. We lived in this orange grove and papa got the owner

to subdivide the orange grove. These springs were called Green Springs. The Indians said that they had curative powers. Well, papa drank a lot of that water. I couldn't stand it because it smelled like rotten eggs. That water never did him any good. Later, after he had suffered so long, his asthmatic condition finally left him. All he knew about his family origin was Bullock County, Georgia. His father had named my father George Bullock Thomas. On my mother's side they were doctors and educators. The first one was taken out of a Scotch debtor's prison and brought to Georgia. We've been in debt ever since. (Laughter). Her father was a medical doctor. Mother was well educated. After the Civil War he wasn't allowed to practice medicine, so he started schools. In Milledgeville, Georgia, he started what is now the Georgia Military Academy. It was then a lady's seminary. Mother taught English and athletics. They pounded a croquet ball around and a little tennis. I had three brothers, all younger than I. My kid brother Gene won a scholarship to Davidson College through the Daughters of the Confederacy. All of them were "blue-stocking" Presbyterians. At that time Davidson was more or less a Presbyterian theological college. He spent one year there; he majored in Spanish. His prize was a copy of Don Quixote in Spanish. Tampa at that time was growing up, and up until 1927 or '28 it was a big cigar manufacturing place. There were lots of Cubans living there and making cigars. It was interesting that every morning each floor of the building had a reader that read the paper and would answer questions when he got done. The cigar

makers could keep right on working and still keep up with the current events. I think that's one reason why Gene majored in Spanish. We persuaded my mother and father to let him come out here for that summer. While he was here, two of my wife's cousins were going to the College of Mines. He became enamored with the school and the people that he met. We persuaded mom to let him go to the College of Mines. She did, so we made a hard-assed engineer out of what would have been a Presbyterian preacher. His first job was down at Terlingua at the quicksilver mine. Then he came here to the city engineering department. Then Cap Kidd, who was then head of the College of Mines, persuaded him to come out and teach. Then a year or two after that he went to M.I.T. and got his master's and then came back here and was Dean of the School of Engineering for 26 or 27 years. He is now down at Salado at a resort that is being developed. All of his peers and brothers-in-law have passed on or are out of the way. Going back to Green Springs . . . after papa developed that area the Springs began to put on an advertising campaign. A sanatorium was built there. I haven't been back there since 1927. Both of the brothers between Gene and I have passed on. The only direct relative that I have is a niece. They live in Clewiston down on the Okeechobee. I left home in 1915. I went up to visit some friends in Louisville, Kentucky. We went to a party one Saturday night and we got a little tight. The old gentleman of the house dressed us down the next morning. Well, neither one of us resented it; we knew we were in the wrong. One day we were walking down Twig Street in Louisville and there was

a sign hung over the second story of the building. It said, "Men Wanted for the U. S. Army." We had been discussing the pending European war. His son wanted to go and join the Canadian Air Force. The folks put their foot down on it. I had not thought much about it until after discussing it with my friend. We decided to enlist. We went up the stairs and they put me on the scales and I had to gain 6 or 7 pounds. We were both underage. He sent me down to the fruit stand on the corner and told me to get one half dozen bananas, eat them, then get back on the scale; that's the way it started. Both of us were sent to Columbus Barracks, Ohio, which was the recruit depot. It's now Fort Hays. We were both assigned to the same company. The first sergeant of the 26th Recruit Company was a convert of Billy Sunday. While he was a strict disciplinarian, I never heard him raise his voice or ball anybody out unmercifully. He suggested that I take the Army Administration Course. I did and I was assigned to Fort Meyer, Virginia. I had selected it. I was assigned as a troop clerk at Fort Meyer. On March 9, 1916, Villa went into Columbus. Then there were troops here at Fort Bliss. Part of the Tenth Cavalry and an infantry outfit were at Fort Huachuca. They were the ones that were here on the border. On March 13 we received orders to pack up and go to México. One of the telephone operators called our first sergeant before the orders were sent on to headquarters. We had several hours' head start. I belonged to the Third Squadron. The First Squadron was at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, near Chicago. The Second Squadron was at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Word was passed to the other squadrons. We picked up the First Squadron in Chicago. The Second Squadron arrived in Columbus before we did. We had to stop every few hours to unload the horses, water them, and feed them. One of those stops was in Fort Worth, Texas. I was left in charge of the train after we unloaded the horses. The coaches were pulled back up to the depot. I was sitting there watching a street that seemed to end at the railroad tracks. While I was sitting there I saw this cowboy ride up with his chaps and everything on. On the corner was a saloon with the swinging doors. He rode his horse right on in there. (Laughter). We finally got to Columbus. I think we were on the road for four days. By the time all the other units arrived and we got ready for field duty, we crossed over the border on March 29, 1916. We had a group of Apache Indians as scouts. The Fifth Cavalry trained them before they left to Hawaii. The Indians met us at Columbus. The first night in México was cold. Gibson's Ranch was the first campsite in México. There was a lake there and it was cold as hell. My campmate and I put up our pup tent and during the night it snowed; we both woke up in the morning with snow all over our feet. Later my horse was lamed and I wasn't able to ride him. Back up from our camp the Indians went up and there was a very deep arroyo there. That night we were awakened by the most gosh-awful racket you ever heard. We heard some people going up that way so we went up too. There was the Apache troop stripped down and having a war dance. The Mexicans hated the Apaches worse than anything else in the world, and the feeling was mutual.

You know, it was enough to make the hair on the back of your neck stand up. On the way down into México, my troop was never in any action. It was always the same old thing; march up and march down. Finally we got to El Valle and a permanent camp was set up there. We were the only cavalry regiment there. There were two regiments of infantry and one of mountain battery. That's where we started to build our mess hall, hoping to get it ready for Thanksgiving. We would scout around and sometimes be gone for three or four days. All during the summer, units were allowed to go to the Madero Forest for camping or hunting. We had a guide that had lived out there. His name was Miller but they called him Boogal. He got permission to go mountain lion hunting. Well, he pulled out of camp and didn't take a horse. He didn't come back on the first night so we sent out a search party. At the time I was a corporal and I had four men under me. We were coming down the side of a mountain and there was a ledge; three or four feet below that was another ledge. As I was beginning to jump, the second man said, "Don't jump, corporal!" I had already jumped. Well, we pulled thirteen rattlesnakes from under that ledge. We didn't know whether Boogal had been bitten by a rattlesnake or what. But he finally showed up in camp about 3 o'clock on the second day. He didn't find any mountain lions; I think he really got lost. The Geronimo Ranch was quite a place. It was in a valley with mountains off to the east. You could see them from where our camp was. You could see that there was a cave from the back side. It was big enough to put a troop of cavalry with all

their horses in it; it was a huge thing. It is said that Geronimo and some of his warriors hid in that cave to watch the Mexican troops hunt them. Col. Wilder, who was in command of the Fifth Cavalry, sent out a patrol. We had captured a Mexican captain. He said if Col. Wilder would let him go, he would go with the patrol and pick out all the Villistas in the vicinity. He didn't go with the patrol, but the patrol brought back a whole string of peons. The captain was put inside of a tent with a peep-hole. As the peons marched by, he would indicate whether or not they were Villistas. He picked out three Villistas and the Indians were detailed to take them back to Pershing's headquarters. Well, the Apaches arrived at General Pershing's camp without any prisoners. On inquiry the Indians said that they got sick and died. They finally sent out a patrol and found all three of the Mexicans hanging from the same tree. The captain was given a horse and he started out in the opposite direction, towards the east. Later he was found hanged. We were down there for 11 months. As we left Colonia Dublán, hay was stacked up a story high with many bushels of corn. It was all set on fire so the Mexicans couldn't get any benefit out of it. Now, those poor old peons could have taken the corn and made corn tortillas. The hay could have been traded, but it was all burned. That shows how wasteful the army can be. I can remember that Lieutenant Boyd had a detachment from the Tenth Cavalry, the colored outfit, and was told to go to a place beyond Carrizal. When he got there the Carrancista commander told him not to go through. Well, he started to go through and the Mexicans

open fire and killed quite a few. They took the rest prisoners and Lieutenant Boyd was killed. We sat in the camp and we never made a move. We could have been there in 24 hours. But you never know...the thing of it is, you question the superior and he says, "Well, you haven't got the big picture," and of course you don't have. The last time Villa took Juárez he sent word to the mayor. They thought it was not right to fight on Sunday. So one minute after twelve on Sunday night Villa was going to attack Juárez. Sure enough, that's the way it started. My wife and I at that time were living on Wheeling Street. The house was built on the high side and in the back was a sleeping porch with screening. It was up on posts. My wife woke me up and said, "Villa is taking Juárez!" I said, "Well, let him take it." She said, "He doesn't do it every day!" I said, "No, but he does it every year." So I rolled over and went back to sleep. But the next day the rifle fire was coming over here. They put a cannon in the middle of the bridge and sent word to Villa's troops who were all in the old race track out there; that was close to town. If any more firing came onto this side of the river, our troops would go in and fire where the Mexicans were. Finally the order was given to fire. They fired one shell and it went right into the race track and it killed a hell of a lot of them over there. Then the Mexican troops began to withdraw. Our cavalry troops started to chase them. They chased them all day and then turned around and came back. On our way down and through the various camps there were a lot of Chinese in México. They got scared or were told to leave, so they appealed to General Pershing to designate them as refugees and bring them back to the States. This was done. We were not allowed

to fraternize with the señoritas. It seems they were afraid of gonorrhoea. Anyway, a whorehouse was established under medical supervision. These women were examined everyday; the men were examined before they went in and after they came out. We had no venereal disease breakout. So that shows that maybe those higher up...we didn't have the big picture, but they did. That's all I can tell you unless you have some specific questions.

N: What was the purpose of having you stationed down there for 11 months without being involved in battle?

T: We were strung out from the border clear on down to Ojo Caliente, our farthest camp. Before we even went into México Pancho Villa was promised, because he had cleared the northern half of México of any other revolutionary people, recognition by the State Department as de facto president of México. Then Carranza started north. Actually, you couldn't tell one from the other. Just like the North Koreans and the South Koreans or the North and South Vietnamese. We were sent down there for the pacification of México. We didn't do much to pacify it, but I do think it had a sobering effect. Another effect -- our troop had come back from Hawaii and they were stationed at Fort Apache, Arizona. All they did was ride patrol around the Indian reservation. Every summer they would go up to Tobihana, Pennsylvania to give training to the National Guard. The American troops had not been in the field for a long time. It gave us the feeling of field duty. It also gave the 35-40,000 National Guard troops the feeling of field duty. The western part of lower California had been more or less quiet. Because of the Indians, the Tarahumaras, no one could go in there except a few mining people. We got pretty good training while we were down there.

- N: You sometimes hear the suggestion that the Pershing Expedition was the training ground for the U. S. for World War I.
- T: Yes sir. We could tell whether our equipment was capable of maintaining a unit in the field. President Wilson said, "The world is safe for democracy." Mr. Roosevelt said, "Your sons will never fight on foreign soil." Going back to 1914, the marines captured about 4000 Mexicans and brought them back as prisoners. But I do know this: after Carranza began to gain popularity, he was recognized as the de facto president of México. I have always felt that Villa attacked Columbus in reprisal for that recognition, and also because he asked that his troops be allowed to come in a field train to Nogales, Arizona, where Villa had a very large force. It's just too bad we have so many politicians and so few statesmen among us.
- N: Do you remember any personalities or individuals at the time you were in México that particularly impressed you?
- T: Only General Funston. He came down on an inspection trip one time. While he was a man of small physical stature, he was a great soldier. He had the respect of more enlisted people than almost any officer I have ever known. The only other character was Col. Tommy Tompkins of the Seventh Cavalry. He was noted for his red beard and his red-headed language. I remember one time at a polo game on Sunday afternoon. There were four ladies that came up in a touring car without any top on it. They started to cross the polo field so they could see a little better. Tompkins hollered, "Hey, get the hell out of there!" He trotted out to the car and one of the ladies said, "Why Colonel!" He said, "Well, excuse me ladies, but, goddammit, you've

got no business on this polo field." He was quite a man. I would say that the average officers we had in México were run of the mill. My troop commander was old Col. Barton. He had ulcers and lived on condensed milk most of the time. The only character we had was old Sergeant Shichinger, the first sergeant. He joined the Fifth Cavalry while the troops were in Tampa, Florida. He was quite a character. He still had a heavy accent. When the 82nd Field Artillery was activated here, he was given a captaincy and put in command of a battery of artillery. He didn't know anything about artillery. He had not been highly educated, like many of the immigrants back in those days, but he was a real soldier. We were having pistol practice out at the range and we had targets hung down from a line. We were using automatic pistols. As your turn came, you raised your pistol and shot as you came down with it. Well, the old man was sitting on his horse and when he pulled the trigger he put a hole in the brim of his hat. He turned around to the troop commander and said, "I hand you my gun and my resignation. Any damn fool that would do that doesn't deserve to be the first sergeant of any troop." Going back to our arriving here; there was no civilian border patrol, so the troop had to take care of that. Our troop drew one detail. We went to Fabens and started the camp there. We would send out patrols as far as Fort Hancock and the railroad bridges and places where Mexicans were normally traveling back and forth. We had a major by the name of John O'Shay. Whenever he was officer of the day, the sentry at number one post would come out and say, "Turn out the guard,

John O'Shay!" The man would come about and say, "What did you say?" There was an old pioneer, General Glasgow -- he got to be a one star general. At the time he commanded our squadron in México he was a major. He married the daughter of one of the pioneers here on Magoffin Street. He married into the Magoffin family. When he died two years ago, he was the oldest living graduate of West Point. Well, he retired and went to work with the aluminum people down there. There is one daughter living; she was the librarian out at the Fort Bliss school for years. One son passed away and there is another one living here in El Paso, but he is in very bad shape. General Glasgow was his name. I never knew him to get mad except for one time. In one of the camps there was a small river and time was set up for each squadron to take their horses down to the river. Somewhere along the line this other squadron had missed out, but they were waiting right ahead of us. The colonel raised hell with that squadron commander. Really, I have no right to criticize the army because it has been good to me. From August 13, 1915 until I retired in June of 1955 I belonged to the army either on active duty or reserve. Not one time was I without a commission. They used to renew it every five years. I came in as a buck private and I rose very rapidly, but I was a captain for God knows how long a time. Then I was made major in 1943 and less than a year later I was made lieutenant colonel. I draw the retired pay for a retired colonel of thirty years service.

N: Are there any memories that you have of the city of El Paso after you came out of México and were stationed at Fort Bliss?

T: Back in those days we didn't have a military police. South of Overland Street the military was not allowed to walk the streets unless there were two or more. So military police had to be partners. Down there was a place they called the Blockhouse. It was a square building with a patio in the middle. It was filled with so-called ladies of the night. They all had a police whistle. My partner and I were circling through the Horseshoe Bar and all of a sudden we heard the police whistles blowing. We ducked out the back door and went down the alley. Both of us tripped over something. We turned on our flashlights and there was a Mexican lying there with two butcher knives stuck in him. By the time we got back to the Blockhouse it had quieted down. We didn't find anything except the girls going back to their rooms. When I came out of México, El Paso didn't go much further east than Five Points. The streetcar ran up the hill to Piedras and then out to McKinley and out to Fort Bliss. There was another line heading out the smelter way. I don't remember if there was one on Mesa or not. I lived down in the valley part of the time; I used to catch the inter-urban. It ran from here to Ysleta; I don't think it went to Fabens. Piedras Street at that time was really scattered. Manhattan Heights was there and then there was a vacant space. There were a few houses up near the post but they weren't built up solid. Where we're living today, we could have bought it all for 25¢ an acre. Of course, there were 60,000 to 80,000 people here at that time. About 90% couldn't read English and 50% of those couldn't speak English. It was a tough little town; that is one thing that I

can say for it. At that time all of the colored population were either pullman porters or barbers. There were colored people in every barber shop; several owned their own shops. I don't remember any white barbers at all. By the Popular Dry Goods on the Texas Street entrance was the Silverberg Brothers Jewelry Store. Across on the corner was the Albert's Jewelry Store. I don't remember where Hixon's was at that time. On the northeast corner of Texas and Mesa was the Sun Drug Company. On the opposite side of the street was the Elite Confectionery. Up from the Sun Drug Co. was a dentist, Dr. Ortner. He was a great dentist if you caught him when he didn't have too much to drink. Then in between was a Mr. Nord, who had a watch repair. Then there was Mrs. Clark's cafeteria, which was the most popular place to eat downtown in those days. Most of the drug stores had a lunch counter. The Harvey House at the railroad station was a delightful place. Then next to Mrs. Clark's was the Nations Meat Market and Grocery. It was a big affair. On the corner was the Orndorff Hotel. Up the street, across the tracks at Mesa and Main on the west side, was the Crawford Theater. We had traveling stock companies come through here. When we first came out of México and there were so many soldiers here, the stock company was the Teal Stock Company. He had a group of gals, singers and dancers, who were the Teal Ducklings. They would put on a nice little burlesque. The place was packed all of the time. On the northwest corner of Texas and Campbell, across the street from where Metcalf's is now, was the big theater. It was mostly movies, but during the season many stock companies would come there. Many of the plays had noted names. The Quinn brothers were operating it. It was the Texas Grand Theater. My wife's mother and father were here; they had a specialty shop here.