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Interview no. 216

Mollie Gossett

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Mollie Gossett (1901-1976)
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 2, 1975
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TRANSCRIBER: Sarah E. John
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Longtime El Paso resident, member of refugee family who moved to El Paso from Torreón during the Mexican Revolution.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; move to El Paso from Torreón with her family who were refugiados during the Mexican Revolution; life in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez.

1 hour.
14 pages.

This is an Oral History interview with Mrs. Mollie Gossett of 9812 Eugenia, El Paso, Texas. The date is December 2, 1975. Interviewing is Sarah John.

J: Mrs. Gossett, can you tell us when and where you were born, please?

G: I was born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, México, in 1901.

J: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

G: My daddy was an American, and my mother was part French and part Spanish. My mother and daddy were married in Eagle Pass, Texas. My mother went to the convent [there] with the Sisters, and my daddy's sister was going at the same time. That's how my daddy met my mother. She was fourteen years old when they got married. He was working then at the railroad, building railroads from Eagle Pass to Monterrey. Then later he went to American Smelting in Torreón. After a while he was made Assistant Superintendent there. We lived there quite a while. But when I was twelve--that was in 1913--we had to leave. In fact, they had to evacuate us as refugees. The American Consul came and told my dad [that] we had two hours to get out of Torreón. We had our home and our furniture; we had to leave everything. Mother only had time to get sheets to put our clothes in. There were eleven children; the baby--Oscar--was five months old. They took us by wagon from the American Smelting Company. The American Consul there was Mr. Carodus. So they took us to Torreón to the special train [sent] from the United States to bring three hundred families from Torreón to El Paso. I don't know why, but after we got to Torreón, we had to wait two days. My mother had one side of the Pullman with all the children. Then we started out to San Pedro.

J: Tell me about what happened before you left. How did you live? What was life like at that time?

G: It was great. We had a wonderful life; my dad had a wonderful job. We had everything we needed. We had private tutors in English and Spanish, because the schools were closed on account of the Revolution. And being a Smelter town, it was small. We had an English teacher in the morning and a Spanish teacher in the afternoon. We had a fourteen room house with beautiful furniture; we had two living rooms. My dad was a fanatic about furniture, and my mother had the most beautiful bedroom imported from Germany, with a red velvet canopy. Then we had a first living room with long drapes and beautiful love seat suites. By the way, I got in one day. We were not supposed to get in the living room. Dr. Villarreal's [uncle] was my sister's godfather, and they came to visit. My mother made signs with her eyes to me to get out. I was about 10 or 11. I got so scared I fell off the chair because I knew I was going to get a whipping! "Ora verás," she said. [Laughter] So, I had to get out by walking backwards! It wasn't too long after that [that we had to leave]. My brother Willie was two years older [than I was]; everywhere he went, I'd go. I was a regular tomboy. We got on top of the house, and we saw all this dust. We had one of those old-fashioned phones. My dad called and said to get all the kids inside; "Here come the rebels!" Villa's men [were] coming to kill the federales that were stationed in Torreón. Well, we were up there [on the roof]; we thought it was fun! Bullets were just "psst-psst" shooting over our heads! But, finally, mother sent one of the men that worked for us, a mozo, and [he] got us down. By that time, there were three or four men at our door on horses. Well, they walked right in, horses and all, into our patio! We had a garden in the middle--

Mexican style--but we had a little fountain. So they let their horses drink water right inside of our garden. They said, "¡Andele! ¡Queremos comer!" They had a cabecilla; his name was Díaz. He was a very famous cabecilla. He was in charge of that troop. He was in there with them; there were about four or five men with him. So my mother came out of her room and told them, "Y ustedes, ¿qué creen que es aquí, caballeriza o cuartel? ¡Se me salen ahorita mismo!" My mother, imagine! "Y ellos con las carabinotas!" She said, "I will not feed anybody unless you take your horses out to the back yard. You can eat here, but get your horses to the back where they belong." So the cabecilla said, "Ah. ¡Andele, fuera!" because mother was so brave. Imagine, they could have killed her and killed us all! But he respected mother because he saw that she was so brave. We had a few refugees in our home [because] there had been a cloudburst and the peones had had their homes washed away; so they came to stay up there. And [Díaz] thought that my father was getting men together for a revolution or something because there were about ten or twenty extra men [at the house]. So, he took my father out, and they were going to fusilar--execute him across the street. They marched him out there. My sister Maggie was fourteen then. She went right up with my daddy and them. Lo pararon, and this cabecilla said, "Vamos a fusilarte, gringo, porque andas juntando hombres." Maggie stood in front of him and said, "All right. If you're going to kill my daddy, you have to kill me, too!" So this cabecilla said, "Well, this family is something else! We can't do anything. ¡Salte, pues! ¡Pero se me salen en dos horas!" Boy, we were crawling! So mother was packing and the company sent a car for us. Then we started, about two days after being on the train. We started to San Pedro, and we couldn't go any further. We had to stay

there. They had burned the bridge. The train had about eighteen or twenty cars and three hundred families. The men of the train--all of the fathers and husbands--would build the bridge. We had flat cars with lumber; and they would build the bridge and then we'd go by. Half way from Torreón to Monterrey we had three asaltos. Some of these bandits--revolutionaries--would get on the train and steal some of our food. We had a whole load of canned goods; the government had furnished everything. So they stole [what we had]. We'd been on the train two weeks when somebody saw a cow or a bull out on the prairie. So they all got out and killed it. They had big tubs and they made soup and cooked that meat to feed us. Of course, mother would nurse the baby, but she needed food. Anyway, you can imagine mother with eleven kids without a bath! So, she saw a ditch out in the prairie. I think it was where the cattle would drink water. Right away, they stopped the train and said, "Everybody get out and take a bath if you want to." It was muddy water. So they started washing our hair; [we were] full of soap. We hadn't been there very long when [someone began] shooting at us. We had to get on the train, full of soap! [Laughter] So that's the way we stayed till we got to Monterrey! There we picked up my grandma--Mamá Panchita--to go to El Paso. By that time, Villa and his men came along; and he got on the train. They were killing the federales. Some of them were cutting the bottom of their feet, and they'd throw them on our train. Then the Villistas thought we were helping [the federales]. Mother hid one. He was kind of güerito and she took him and said that he was one of her sons. My sister Maggie was beautiful. Pues era preciosa. So mother had to tie [my sisters'] heads with some rags so that they wouldn't see them. They were stealing the girls--taking them out. So my daddy had a gun and he said to get on one end of the

coach. He told the girls, "If some of these bandits get on this train, I'm going to have to shoot you both." He'd rather shoot them than let [the bandits] take them. You can imagine what it was [like] for mother. Those two girls were beautiful; of course, Maggie was the prettiest one. She was fourteen. So he said, "I'll have to shoot you." We finally made it. In Monterrey they said [that there was] no pass at all to El Paso. We had to go back to Tampico and take a boat there to Galveston--five days. We had a terrible storm, and I nearly died. And they told mama they'd have to bury me at sea, because I was vomiting all over the place! [Laughter] But I got by. They kept us in quarantine for ten days before they let us out of the boat. In Galveston, my daddy took us to a hotel [so that] we all could get cleaned up. Then we got a train.

J: What did you use for money? Were you able to bring money with you?

G: Mother had a little money stuck way in the baby's clothes. She was able to save some of the money--not too much. Then we came to El Paso. We could either go to San Antonio, where my daddy's mother was, or we could come to El Paso where the Smelter was. So my daddy said, "Let's go to El Paso." We had to stay at this depot here, Lord, nearly the whole day. We got in about 7 in the morning. Of course, mother gave us some money, and we bought candy. The first thing I bought was a Hershey bar. [Laughter] I didn't know what they were, but they sure were good! They were 5 cents. My daddy went out and we stayed there all day until he could find a place to take us. He found a hotel somewhere around San Francisco Street, so we stayed there. He went out to look for a home for us. He got us settled at 1000 Mundy. Then he went to work right away, on the second day. We got here on the 1st of November, 1913; he went in to report [on that day, also]. They gave him a job right away. Mr. Ernest Arms

was the superintendent. He came right away and gave us a lot of first aid and got the doctor to see us. But on the third day, my daddy came home with his lunch, and he went to bed. He never got up again. He died on the 7th, a week after we [got] here. So there we were. Mother was sick with the influenza; they all were, except me. I took care of my baby brother. I used to feed him rice water. Pues no había leche. But I could go to the store; mother would send me. Then [my brother] Hugh went to work in Juárez. Mother had a little money, so he bought an Overland car. He was chauffeuring Pancho Villa. And Willie was there, too. Villa had gotten into Juárez, shooting and killing everybody. So Luis Cantú was importing cueros--leather. They got him and took him to jail.

J: Was he related to you?

G: He was my mother's cousin. Somehow he sent word; somebody came and told mother [that] they were going to take him out to shoot him behind the jail in Juárez. So mother got dressed, y ahí vamos. She took me along to the cuartel. It was on Avenida Lerdo; and that was Villa's headquarters. So mother went in; they finally let us in. [Villa] dijo: "Bueno, y ustedes, ¿qué quieren?" "Pues vine a ver mi sobrino, porque lo tiene preso." "Eso no es nada. Mañana lo vamos a fusilar, y a toda su generación; ¡a toda su familia!" Mother said, "Y a ver, ¿por qué?" He said, "Pues éste trae contrabandos." "No, pero ¿por qué? Es su negocio de años, comprar cueros y venderlos. No es contrabando. Paga él contribuciones." "¡No, no, no! De todos modos, lo fusilan mañana." But I don't know... He saw mother so brave, he finally said, "Se lo lleva, pero no lo quiero volver a ver aquí." So we brought him back on the streetcar from Juárez.

J: What did Villa look like?

G: Prieto, con bigotón; feo. He was coarse looking. But they say he was

doing a lot of charity work; but he was killing people, anybody that got in his way. We brought our cousin over, but the boys kept working over there. Tillie and Maggie went to work at the Popular for \$3.00 a week. The Popular was only one floor, right where it is [now]. And the town-- pues de atiro pelón. They still had those little buggies with one horse. They called them jardineras, because they'd go around the jardines. They'd take you from, say, the Popular up to Upson where we lived for 50¢. I don't remember how the White House was, but it was there; pero muy chiquito-- just one floor.

J: What kind of social life was there here in El Paso and Juárez during that time?

G: Well, there were a lot of very distinguished families from Chihuahua: the Terrazas, the Lujáns, the Maderos--Ernesto Madero. And we had a beautiful Mexican Casino behind the Del Norte Hotel. Then there was a casino at the Customhouse in Juárez--La Aduana. Obregón came in 1915 or 1916; anyway I danced with him. By that time I was 15; I was going to the dances. Then at the agriculture school they'd have picnics.

J: I'd like to backtrack a little and get some more details about your trip to the United States.

G: As I said, we only had two hours to get out of town, out of the house. We had to leave everything. It took 40 days--a month and 10 days--from Torreón to Monterrey. Of course, you can imagine what we went through; but we were lucky because the United States had provided a lot of groceries: canned goods, meats, canned vegetables, lots of canned milk, for all the people. But after being out two weeks, bandidos came in and robbed the train of a lot of the food; not all together, but they took everything they wanted. Anyway, we kept on going. I don't know how we did it;

but, here we are. But we were lucky; in other words, we had transportation. There were some of the finest families from Torreón--Gómez Palacio, Lerdo--walking with their children out in the prairie. Our train couldn't pick anybody up because we were coming out of the windows ourselves! We had guards--we couldn't pick up anybody. Anyway, we came on. When we finally got to Tampico, we took that boat--it was called "Texas." We came to San Antonio after being quarantined; then we came to El Paso, and my daddy went to the Smelter. He died a week later, so there we were. My brothers all went to work. One of my brothers--Hughie--bought that Overland and used it as a taxi. He used to drive Villa around in Juárez, imagine! Then my brother Willie--he was only about 15--would sneak over. My mother didn't know, but he'd go over there and drive. One day, he was standing on the corner of 16th of September and Avenida Juárez, right by Villa. You know, my big shot brother! Some guy came up to Villa--and of course he was nervous, the poor old guy. He put his hand in his pocket to get his handkerchief, and Villa shot him--POW--right in the stomach. He shot him two times. Villa said, "Qué tonto. ¿Por qué anda metiendo la mano a la bolsa?" He thought [the man] was going to shoot him! Of course, mother didn't know any of this, but Willie came home and told us. Mother said, "You can't go back." "Oh, no! He's my friend." [Villa] kind of liked him. He used to give him buenas propinas...[Pause]. That means tips. (Ahora ya no sé hablar el español!) [Laughter] On the train, my dad was so worried about us all. But my brother Willie and I would sneak some way and go to another car. He'd look out one window on one side of the train, and I'd look out the other, to see how many men we could see hanging on the posts. We counted them. Some of them were

bloated; some of them had their tongue out. It scared the heck out of me--I couldn't sleep at night!

J: So you made a game out of it?

G: Yes, we made a game. I wanted to see how many I could count. At one of those little towns--I think it was Pomona--they got two federal officers. Les cortaron la lengua y las plantas de los pies. And they threw them on our train! Can you imagine? Everybody was crying and praying. But they died right away. We didn't see them because they were out in front. After we got to El Paso, they stuck me up in Las Cruces at Loretto. By that time, I was almost 13. The Sisters would make me wash dishes and sweep the stove, just like Cinderella, really. And you know what I'd do? They had a great big bowl of milk and they'd boil it. You know that thick cream that [comes to the top]? I used to take it with a big spoon and [eat it] with French bread. I was terrible. They made me work pretty hard, for a poor little innocent girl. My brother Frank found out somehow--I sent word. He had a motorcycle, and he came and took me out. I got in the motorcycle [and rode] all the way from Las Cruces to El Paso. We had an adventure, really. [Pause] They had beautiful parties in Juárez.

J: What years would you say this was, more or less?

G: '14, '15; even '13. Villa was there in '13. He stayed there quite a while, then went to the mountains. That's when Obregón came. Then they made a beautiful casino for all of the refugees. They were all very close, we were all very friendly. They were all good families. They gave this big dance in 1916--I was 15 and I could go to the dance. That's when I danced with el General Escobar and Obregón. (Not at the same time.) [Laughter] So many things happened that I can't remember. One of the [things I can remember most] is that the bandits were stealing young

girls--se las robaban a las muchachas. Then in Santa Rosalia, Villa was really killing people. (Don't put that on paper--iViene y me corta el pescueso! No, pobre, ya lo mataron.) /Laughter/ But they said he was pretty good, that he had a good heart and helped people, that he really was kind of like Robin Hood. He'd rob the rich and help the poor.

There was a big shooting in Juárez, and some of the bullets came across and killed a bunch of nosey people that were looking around. Mirones, you know. You see, Villa was here in Juárez, then he went to Palomas, then he came back to Juárez. That's when Pershing went over with the troops to Villa Ahumada, close to Chihuahua.

J: Do you remember anything in particular about that?

G: I saw Pershing getting all the troops on the train--Willie and I went to see. But they came back; they didn't catch him. They couldn't find him. ¿Qué le iban a pescar? iSe escondía en la sierra! Pershing went in pretty deep into Mexico. Ft. Bliss no tenía nada. No tenía buildings--/just/ little shacks nomás. (Later, my brothers Frank and Hugh worked building those big officers' homes.)

J: In 1916, Villa's men killed several American engineers in Santa Isabel, Chihuahua. We've read that in retaliation, many El Pasoans got together and wanted to run the Mexican community into Mexico. Do you remember anything about that incident?

G: I don't remember that, but I do remember that the troops here put a cañon on Mt. Franklin and they would shoot at Juárez, porque ya estaban metiendo. In South El Paso, era una pelotera--fights on that account; americanos con mexicanos. Terrible. ¿Qué culpa tenían? It was terrible. For quite a while it was bad. We couldn't go out at night at all.

J: Can you tell us about the experience your brother Hugh had when he was taking your cousin to Torreón?

G: Hugh went to take my cousin to Torreón. That was way after we got here. He was taking her back. Eloisa is her name. Halfway this side of Chihuahua, they stopped the train. Here comes a bunch, robbing the train, taking jewelry and clothes. So my brother had a ring that belonged to my daddy. One of the guys says, "Déme el anillo." My brother said, "Pos, éste no me sale." "Ah, qué bueno." And he got out a machete, una daga. "Bueno, ponga el dedo para cortárselo." Hugh just shook his hand and the ring fell off! [Laughter] ¡Del susto que llevó! They took their clothes; they took off his pants! They left his shirt and his underwear. And they took her skirt off para las soldadas. You know they had their women with them. They'd go everywhere with them.

J: They fought with them, too.

G: Oh, yes. They'd have a baby down in the prairie, pick it up, y allí van. I saw that myself, when we were coming. There were the men, la tropa, and the soldadas de atrás, a pie, fíjate. We were stopped. A [woman] went off to a little place and had her baby. Mamá le ayudó; le aventó mantillas y pan. She didn't get off the train. There were little kids, six or seven years old, pidiendo. Mother would give her whatever she could.

J: Do you remember anything about the '20's? What was El Paso like during that time?

G: It was kind of a dead town, really. There was not much going on. There was very little traffic.

J: During Prohibition, did a lot of people go over to Juárez? Were there any bootleggers in El Paso?

G: Oh, Lord, yes! There was one called the Hole in the Wall. I think it was between El Paso and Fabens. They could go and get drinks [there].

J: I've heard that there was a lot of gambling and quite a few night clubs in Juárez at that time.

G: They had the biggest gambling house called the Casino Tivolí. They had roulette. After I got married in 1922, Bob took me over there one night. (I couldn't go over before I was married.) Another place was the Big Kid's Palace, and the owner was a big guy. I think he was German. Era pura peladera--gambling and rooms upstairs y quién sabe cuánto. Of course, we just heard about that. It was pretty bad. Then they had these "houses" over there in Juárez; they finally moved them back. Como ahora--the same thing. They've got all of that over there now--gambling and casinos escondidos. I guess it was because we were so young, [but] El Paso was very quiet to me, not exactly like [it is now]--buildings, banks. There was one bank--the State National. That's where mama used to put [her money]. After my daddy died, we got the insurance five years later. So she put it there. Then the boys started squandering it on motorcycles and cars.

J: How do you remember the Depression?

G: Well, it was pretty bad. I was already married. I didn't suffer because Bob had his own business.

J: What kind of business did he have?

G: Wholesale butter and eggs. Teníamos buen negocio. [During the Depression] we didn't have any hard times. ¿Para qué te voy a decir? We didn't suffer, but a lot of people did. There were bread lines; there were a lot of people out of work. Pero los muchachos (Frank, Hugh, George), no. They were working at Carlsbad, putting the lights in the caves.

J: What do you think about El Paso and Juárez now?

G: El Paso is great; it's beautiful. Of course, this is home. There's no other climate like in El Paso, even though we get dust storms. Pero no hay como El Paso. And it's progressed so much. I don't know too much about Juárez. Since I got married, I got away from all that. I don't go much, so I really couldn't tell you much about that. The society over there está muy bien. Hay muy bonitos clubs--Juvenil, Batón Rojo. Juárez has progressed, too.

J: Do you remember how Mexican people were treated in El Paso? Were they treated well, or was there prejudice against them at that time?

G: Not one bit that I can think of. You never would hear about discrimination in the schools; we all went together. Nobody bothered anybody. De veras.

No había que "Chicano" pa' aca. No había nada de eso. It was very peaceful, no te digo. You didn't see all these killings that we're having now cada rato.

Matan a alguien and they find them out in the desert. Antes, no. Besides /that/, prices now are terrible! You could get a big loaf of French bread for 5¢, and a quart of milk for 10¢.

[Pause]

J: Can you tell us one of the more interesting comical experiences of your life?

G: I guess it's that I don't like chocolate candy [now]. One day my sister took me with her with her boyfriend, because she couldn't go out with a boyfriend unless I was with her. So we went to sit in the park on one of the benches so they could talk. They didn't even kiss or anything, but I had to be a chaperone. Anyway, coming back, he had to take a streetcar from Torreón to the Smelter where we lived [this is while we were still in México]. The fellow bought Tillie a bag of beautiful American chocolate candy from the American drug store--Warners Drug

Store. I was 7 or 8, so they wanted to keep me quiet. They sent me to the back of the streetcar and they gave me the package of candy. My sister says, "Just eat one or two and save them. We're going to have to hide them. Don't you tell Mother that José gave me this candy." So I said, "Oh, no." So I was sitting over there, and I started eating. Some of them were wrapped in different colored tins--pretty colors--gold, green, etc. At about the 10th or 11th candy I began to get sick; so I'd eat one and throw one out the window! Finally, I was really sick. It took us 40 minutes to ride, so when we got there, Tillie said, "¡Andale!" She picked me up. "What's the matter? Where's the candy?" "It's gone." "Pero, ¿cómo? You couldn't have eaten it all!" So when we got home, Mother was at the door waiting for us. When she saw me, she said, "What's the matter with her?" Tillie said, "I don't know; she ate some candy." "What kind?" "Oh, just a little piece of candy. It made her sick." I was burning up with fever! They had to send me to the hospital. I was such a pig! [Laughter]

J: Thank you very much for your interesting and humorous interview,
Mrs. Gossett.