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Interview no. 282

George E. Barnhart

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: George E. Barnhart (1896-)
INTERVIEWER: Carlos Tapia
PROJECT: Class project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Old-time El Paso resident.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; the Mexican Revolution; Prohibition; Jim Gilett and John Wesley Hardin; the Depression; World War II; Judge Roy Bean.

50 minutes
14 pages

(Oral History interview with Mr. George E. Barnhart, interviewed by Carlos Tapia in December 1976.)

T: Mr. Barnhart, where were you born and when?

B: West Bends, Oklahoma.

T: What was the date?

B: Well, it's supposed to be February 24, 1896. They didn't keep any records back in them days. I had to check back and I got two or three different [dates, but] that's the one I used to look for a job.

T: What was your father's occupation?

B: Well, originally he was a rancher, but then later on he was a telegraph operator--railroad.

T: Where did you grow up, Mr. Barnhart?

B: All over Texas, part of New Mexico.

T: You mentioned that your father made frequent trips into México when you were a child.

B: Well, he spent a lot of time in México.

T: Where did you attend school and how long did you stay in school?

B: Well, we were on the move all the time. I was born in the Indian Territory, Oklahoma. Now, originally my folks were from down around Austin and San Antonio, and then my grandfather went down into the Big Bend, ranching down there. From there my father went up to Oklahoma, and that's where I was born. They was married up there and he went back to México again. Originally he was down there in Chihuahua state, but for a time he went down into Sonora, Hermosillo. I don't remember too much about him when I was little. He spent much of his time down there. Later on, why, we moved down into South Texas. I went to school down there for a little while, then he went back to work on the railroad; and from then on, we was just on the move all the time, practically. We lived

in Alpine more than any other place. We lived in Marfa, [and] from then on we lived in various little pump stations up and down the road. The schooling I got, mostly I got it at home.

T: So you're mostly self-educated, then?

B: Well, my mother was an ex-schoolteacher, and she give me lessons. And I read a whole lot.

T: Yeah, I see by the books you have.

B: Yes, well, when I was little, a real small kid, I read Victor Hugo's Les Miserables through and through--I guess three or four times, just like that. But then as far as schooling, I got up to maybe the fourth or fifth grade, and that was it.

T: Could you tell me about your occupations, the jobs you've held?

B: Well, my father traded for a little ranch up in New Mexico, Cloudcroft; Eightmile Canyon, north of James Canyon. And he took me up there with him to look after it, after he traded for it. And then later on, why, for a little while the family was up there, but they all left. I stayed up there on the ranch by myself until I got a job in town for a while, firing the town lighting plant. And well, that played out, and my father traded the ranch out for I don't remember what, and I come to El Paso looking for a job.

T: What year was that?

B: Oh, I come to El Paso in 1916, I guess.

T: So you must have seen part of the Mexican Revolution.

B: Yes, I seen quite a bit of it.

T: What can you tell me about it, its effects here in El Paso?

B: Well, like I told you before, I married into a family that was mixed up

in the Revolution.

T: You mentioned something about Pascual Orozco, I believe?

B: Pascual Orozco was a close friend of my father when both of them were young, down in Chihuahua state--principally down in Ojinaga and clear down to Parral.

T: Can you tell me any interesting stories your father might have told you about Pascual?

B: He told me a whole lot. (Laughter) Do you want it?

T: Sure.

B: He was in with Pascual and some more of them over on the other side. They got to the point to where the Mexican government wanted them pretty bad, but they couldn't get them.

T: You mentioned something about the death of Pascual Orozco.

B: Pascual Orozco was killed on this side, down [on] the border, below here.

T: By whom was he killed?

B: He was a prisoner over here, and he just walked out. They wasn't keeping too close a watch over him. He and some of his followers just walked off one day and took off down here--got to El Paso and took down the river. Now, that's the story I got on it. I read half a dozen stories, but I'm talking about the way I got it at the time. There was some ranchers down there, American ranchers, that had some interests over in México and were friends of Pascual. Now, he went down to the ranch looking for horses, but the rancher wasn't there; he was in Sierra Blanca, I believe, but I'm not sure. It's been so long ago. The cow punchers down there thought they was a bunch of raiders, horse-thieves, [so] they started to fight and killed them. And when the head man, the owner, got back, he took it pretty

hard, so I understand. It was a good friend of his, his best friend, that they killed. That's the story we got.

T: Was there a lot of raiding done by the Mexicans in Texas down along the Big Bend? You told me you lived there. Were there a lot of Mexican raids into Texas to steal horses?

B: Oh, yes, there was raids; oh, boy! After the Revolution started, yes, there was. I was just a little kid at the time, of course--a young teenager--but I can remember the raiding up there. I remember one time in particular, they raided up within a few miles of Alpine, and the young federal officer was down trying to raise a posse to go after them. I sure wanted to go, but I was a little kid.

T: Was there any raids done by Americans into México?

B: Into México? Well, that part, I don't know. Maybe there was, I don't know. It was pretty wild over on the other side, and down there in Ojinaga, that was pretty rough back in them days; and they come across on the raids. As far as raiding done from this side, I don't think so. Of course, there was some of that done before the Revolution broke loose; but after the Revolution...there was times when they crossed over from this side into México, but I can't remember the details.

T: Do you remember Villa when he came into Juárez?

B: Well, I didn't meet him personally or anything like that, [but] sure, I definitely knew about it.

T: Did you ever cross into Juárez while Villa was there?

B: No, I stayed out of Juárez while Villa was there.

T: Do you recall the raid on Columbus?

B: Oh, yes; definitely.

T: What were your feelings about it, or the general popular feeling?

B: Well, I can't quite recall. I believe I was in New Mexico when that raid took place, and there was quite a lot of excitement about it. Short of that, I don't recall.

T: Do you remember the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic that occurred here in El Paso?

B: Well, very dimly. I can't recall much about it. I know it was bad. That is about as far back as I can recall.

T: How about World War I? Do you recall anything that happened during World War I?

B: Well, it's so far back, it's hard to recall.

T: Do you recall Prohibition? You told me some stories about Prohibition here in El Paso, when they banned liquor here in the U.S. You told me there was a lot of smuggling from México here.

B: Oh, yes, there was. There was lots of smuggling, fights, and battles down along the river. I can't remember the names, but the worst fight I ever remember was, some of the boys was close relatives of some of the higher-ups down at the courthouse, and one of them was killed. One of my friends was in that bunch, and he told me afterwards that he was never in such a tight place in his life. He had been through World War I, and he hadn't seen anything like that down there. They was all around them, and it seemed that they was shooting at them from three or four feet away sometimes. They managed to get out, and then they got bawled out good for leaving the dead one there.

T: You told me something about a sheriff named Jim Gillett, I believe.

B: Well, Jim Gillett was a town marshall here at one time. Him and my

father come from the same part of the country down there in Austin, San Antonio. Jim Gillett joined the Texas Rangers and later on left them to work for the railroad. I believe he left there and came to El Paso to take over as town marshall. And when I remember him, he was an old... getting along in years, a fairly old man then down at Marfa. And, well, he was a big shot in a bank down there, from a big ranch family. My father was agent there with the railroad. Sometimes they'd get together and talk for old times. That's the way I got to know him by sight; I was a little kid.

T: You told me that he was credited with taming El Paso.

B: Well, that's what they said. When he come here, she was wild; when he left, it was tamed down.

T: Didn't you tell me that he had killed only two men in his entire life?

B: Killed two men in his entire life. One of them was an outlaw, if I remember correctly, down in East Texas somewhere. They wanted this outlaw awful bad, he was trying to get away, and Jim shot him. The other one was an Indian that he killed down in México. México had asked for assistance down there and they sent these Rangers down there to help them out.

T: México had asked the state of Texas, the U.S. government, for assistance against the Indians there?

B: I guess the state of Chihuahua did.

T: Which Indian tribe was it?

B: You'd have to read up on it to make sure, but I believe it was probably Apache; I'm not certain. It had been getting pretty hard for them over on this side. They were ganging up over on the other side, making things

pretty rough over there. I don't remember all the details, but I've read a couple of books on it. They had gone down there to help out, the Rangers did, and Gillett killed an Indian in a fight down there.

T: You told me also about a man named John Wesley Hardin.

B: Well, John Wesley Hardin was a famous outlaw. Hardin operated back in the Austin/San Antonio territory, if I remember correctly, because my grandfather and my great-uncles were all in that same territory. Finally they had Hardin in jail. I'm not certain, I think it was in Austin. He put in a number of years in the penitentiary.

T: You told me a story about his death, how he died.

B: Well, after he got out of the pen (they had pardoned him, I believe), and he came to El Paso (I can remember all the details without checking on it), he got pretty hard to get along with here; and he got in several scrapes and he got killed here. That old fellow that killed him, I can't remember his name, had been on both sides of the law. He'd been a pretty tough hombre himself. At the time, though, he was a deputy marshall or deputy sheriff or something like that. They had a quarrel. This old man had a woman here that there had been some trouble over; John Wesley threatened to shoot him over it, so this old man (I can't recall his name without looking it up in the book) went looking for Hardin. And Hardin was in the saloon. He had threatened to shoot him on sight, Hardin did. This deputy walked up to the door, and they say that Hardin was looking into the mirror and he seen his face in the mirror. The deputy thought Hardin was looking at him, and he jerked out his gun, and shot him, and got him.

T: He got him in the back?

B: I guess he did. Anyway, I guess that was the only fight Hardin ever lost.

T: It was his last one.

B: He'd won a lot of them, and he killed a lot of men.

T: What did you do during the Depression? What was your occupation /then/?

B: Well, I was laid off my job--railroad shop. I had a good friend at that time, Chief Lawrence Robbly, Chief of Police. I asked him for a job, /and/ he told me that it might be 20 years before they ever put anybody on. But then he signed me up as a special officer, and lined me up on getting dances to watch, and occasionally, stores. I kept that up till the Depression was over, because I think I was out of a job for four months. After I went back, /I worked/ half time, /and/ the rest of the time I worked out at the station down there, at odd jobs, of course.

T: You said you covered the Southside beat when you were a policeman during the Depression.

B: Well, yes, we worked principally the Southside and East El Paso.

T: Was there a lot of gang activity at the time?

B: Well, of course, we run into them every time we had a dance.../not audible/... the Mexicans. Now, we had a bunch of the colored boys' dances that would get pretty rough, of course.

T: Did you vote for President Roosevelt?

B: I voted for him the first two times, yes.

T: You told me you didn't like him.

B: I got fed up. I think that's where our inflation started. He laid the groundwork for it, anyway, in my opinion.

T: Do you remember the CCC work projects that he started? Were there any in El Paso?

B: Well, I heard of them, but I can't remember. As far as I'm concerned, why,

I was working for the railroad; and, as I say, I put in most of my extra time working out of the Police Department at that time.

T: When were you laid off from the railroad, what year?

B: Well, the Depression was in '29 and we didn't feel it down here, to speak of, until the '30s. I guess it was in 1930, when I was laid off.

T: Do you remember anything else about the Depression?

B: I remember that it was sure rough. Some of the boys that didn't have anything saved, they were really in a mess.

T: When was the first time you heard the word "Chicano" and what does it mean?

B: I can't recall when was the first time, but it's been a long time ago. A Chicano, as I understand it, is a Mexican raised along this side, ain't it?

T: I believe so. Do you recall World War II?

B: Yes, definitely.

T: Are there any significant incidents that you would like to mention?

B: Well, there was real excitement about it. We were getting us all prepared in case we had to get into it.

T: You mentioned that Roosevelt sold us out to the Russians.

B: Well, I think he did. That's been so far back, it's hard to remember the details. But Russia never amounted to anything until we threw in with them, helped them out. Ain't that about right? Now they're our largest potential enemy, I believe.

T: Do you recall the peso devaluation of 1930?

B: Well, all I can remember about the devaluation of the peso was that when my father used to bring them back from México, they were worth 50¢ on the dollar. And as time went on, they decreased in value. They went down from time

to time, but I never had any dealings with money from the other side, so that's all I know about it.

T: You mentioned that your father-in-law had some dealings in the Mexican Revolution. Could you tell me about that?

B: Well, there was two Generals, one was José Rodríguez. Villa killed one of them, I believe, in Chihuahua. The other one... .. Villa sent him over to this side, I understand. I was told that he gave \$40,000 to buy equipment, and once he got on this side, he kept that for himself. Villa wanted him back pretty bad, but he never did get his hands on him. But, well, my father got him a job on the railroad. He was flat broke in about three years. From here he went to California and bought an orange grove out there. He left somebody looking after it, and he lost that. Then he went up to New York, apparently had a great time up there, and he finally got back down to El Paso. Oh, he had his clothes, and his pistol--still had his six shooter, of course--and a few dollars, maybe 10, 15, 20. When he got here, my father got him a job. He was a telegraph operator for the Revolution. He spoke a little English, not too much. He worked in Sierra Blanca, I believe it was, for a while, after the Southern Pacific hired him. Then some of his enemies started closing in on him, getting close to him, and he took off to San Antonio and was working there as a telegraph operator. General Rodríguez was operating down there on the East Coast; he went over to see him, and arranged with him to join up with him. And, well, he come back up here, talked things over and told his family goodbye. He went back down there and joined this Nicolás Rodríguez. He joined up with him as a general, see, and he stayed with him till the Revolution ended. Later on he was in México City,

had a business, I understand. Finally he come back to El Paso, and died here in El Paso.

T: He's buried here in El Paso?

B: Yes, he's buried in El Paso.

T: Were there a lot of Mexican immigrants that came here during the Revolution?

B: Oh, lots of them. El Paso was full of them.

T: Did they stay here after the Revolution?

B: Some of them got jobs here. We had the railroad shop full of them over there.

T: Did any rich Mexicans come over?

B: Well, the rich Mexicans, I don't know about that. Some of them did, maybe. They were like my father-in-law--they didn't stay rich very long! (Laughter). The ones I know were working class, there were lots of them.

T: You mentioned that you were a gunsmith and that you made a lot of rifles for Mexicans.

B: Well, that's way back yonder, young times. I belonged to that club, Tiradores del Norte. Before that, I belonged to a club over here, see, then the boys talked me into joining up over there. I did most of their work for them over there.

T: You mentioned that you father knew Judge Bean, Judge Roy Bean.

B: Yes, they know each other when they was young men in San Antonio.

T: Can you tell me any stories about Judge Bean?

B: Well, the impression I got from... When I was a little kid, I seen Roy Bean myself, just sitting out on the porch. He was pretty old then, and he spent most of his time sitting out on the porch. My father, after he learned telegraph, went to work for the railroad here. They sent him down

there, and him and Bean got together--they hadn't seen each other for years. And, well, he told me lots of stories, things about Bean. My impression was that Bean had a lot of backing from them ranchers down there. Nobody elected him, he elected himself the law down there. Later on he made it legal, but at first there was no legality to it at all. He just sat himself there.

T: Where was this--Langtry?

B: Langtry, yeah. My father worked out there for a while, possibly two or three times, I'm not sure. See, we changed around a whole lot and we were on friendly terms with... I know he didn't consider Roy Bean a friend. He wasn't no first-class gunman or anything like that. But Roy had the backing of those ranchers down there. Of course, he was trying to bring the law down there, because there wasn't any law. He had to bring the law down there and he succeeded, to a large extent. They gave him the backing because they was tired of being robbed by them cow thieves and horse thieves down there.

T: They called him the "Hanging Judge," didn't they?

B: Yes. Why, yes. I don't know how many he got away with--quite a few. They found a hobo down there that fell off a freight train and got killed. They found a gun on him, and some money (I don't remember how much). Whatever it was, Judge Bean confiscated the gun and fined the dead hobo the amount he had in his pocket for carrying a gun in town.

T: There is another story about Judge Bean and a Chinaman. Could you tell me about that?

B: Well, I heard that story. Looking through a law book, he couldn't find anything against killing a Chinaman, so he dismissed a case against a man

accused of killing a Chinaman, because he he said that he couldn't find anything against killing a Chinaman.

T: He dismissed the cowpoke?

B: Dismissed the case. No law against it. A family in Alpine, the Reagans, they had some kinfolks down in there, branches of pretty hard boys, I understand. The ones in Alpine, one of them was an ex-judge. He was old and retired, which was Judge Reagan. And he had a couple of boys. The youngest one, I don't remember his name, they always called him "Colonel." Everbody used to call him that. Then the older one, he was a good friend of my father, was Arthur, I believe. I can remember one time that we were over at the Reagan house, and he was showing my father a six shooter that he had just ordered from Colt's--a finely engraved .38 special on a .45 cartridge he had made up special. They were not putting them out, he had it made up special in that caliber. Later on he went down there to Langtry, and Judge Bean didn't know him. Well, this boy had learned the telegraph and he was working for the railroad. Judge Bean got too much to drink one day; and went down to the station. He said he was looking for someone to run out of town, and see how fast they could run, and that that fellow looked like he could just about make it. About that time, Arthur come out with his gun, shot down at the floor between Roy's feet, and Roy took off and went home and slept it off. He was all right the next day.

T: So he didn't run him out of town?

B: Not that boy; oh, no. Roy, he wasn't no fighter in the first place. If he had known him, he wouldn't have tried it, see, but he didn't know it. The Reagan family, some of them, they was a pretty rough bunch. This

particular one, he was son of Judge Reagan. And they were good boys, well-educated boys, but they wasn't going to let Roy Bean or anybody else run over them.

T: How long did Judge Bean stay a judge?

B: I can't remember--for a long time. He spent the later part of his life down there.

T: Did he ever become an official judge?

B: Well, yes. He finally got himself appointed as a judge. There was another family down there--I can't recall their names--they cut in on him one time and got one of their boys elected for a term. But then, if I remember correctly, Roy Bean got back in again later on--just a question of getting enough votes. Of course, that was after they made it legal.