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Interview no. 427

E W. Rheinheimer

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: E. W. Rheinheimer (1890-1981)**
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 4, 1977
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:
(Physician)

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

El Paso Baby Sanitarium at Old Tin Mine on the east side of the Franklin Mountains in the 1920s; his medical practice in South El Paso; experiences treating rum-runners during Prohibition; patients in Juárez; Stormsville; diseases prevalent in El Paso in the 1920s; delivering babies; venereal disease; changes in the medical profession. (Also included is a list of the El Paso County Medical Society, organized in 1898.)

**See also No. 124.

45 minutes, 16 pages

Dr. E.W. Rheinheimer
by Oscar J. Martinez
February 4, 1977

M: Dr. Rheinheimer, to start this interview, could you give me a few more details of the baby san, sanitarium, here in El Paso back in the early '20s?

R: Yes. At that time, for several years during the heat of summer, the mortality among the babies in the south side of town was very high. And in about 1921, they organized a baby san at Cloudcroft, and that only aided babies of rich folks who could pay. The treatment doctor was Dr. Branch Craig, Sr. Now, several women in El Paso--I don't know their names--decided to try another plan to take care of the poor people's babies in South El Paso. The old tin mine on the east side of Mt. Franklin had been abandoned, but the walls of the buildings were still there. Some funds were secured, from what source I don't know. I think probably it [was] public subscription. They put a roof over the buildings and got some equipment, beds and cribs and so on, and named it The Baby San at the Old Tin Mine. Now that was in, well, as you stated, early June of 1922.

M: What was the problem with the babies in South El Paso?

R: I'll get to that in just a minute. Dr. Harry Varner and I were appointed to take care of the babies. To get there--there were no paved highways--we went up on the road that paralleled the Southern Pacific railway, El Paso Southwestern then, to just this side of Newman and took out off across to the Franklin Range, about five miles. And the trip was terrific. If you'd get through that with one set of tires intact, you were lucky. It was rocky. But, we managed. We went up there, Dr. Varner one day and I the next (I think that's what it was), and occasionally we'd go together.

Now, you asked what the situation was in downtown El Paso. There was milk available, whole milk, but they had no way of preserving it down there, those poor people; and naturally it spoiled. They fed the babies tortillas

and beans and what not, and they developed these violent intestinal upsets. They were mostly very young, and because of their poor conditions, they just couldn't handle the diet, and they got this enteritis and died. Now, what we did out at this Baby San was use powdered milk and sterile water. There was several nurses that just stayed out there and took care of it that summer. And our mortality out there was nil--I can't recall a death. [So] it wasn't so much because it was cool over there, [but] because [of] the character of the food they were getting in their homes.

M: So it wasn't the location so much of the sanitarium...

R: Except it was cool. In fact, the nights were cold. Oh, I guess we must have treated maybe a hundred or more babies up there, and they all survived. [Of] course, the atmosphere up there helped some because although we had refrigerators, we had to carry ice up there, sometimes we got a little low. But the food couldn't spoil, because it was powdered milk. We recycled it with sterile water. They got along fine.

M: How high up was it? It was on the mountain, the east side of the Franklin Mountain?

R: Yes.

M: About how high, would you say?

R: Well, of course it didn't go way to the top, but about halfway up. I would say 2,000 feet higher than El Paso. On the eastern slope, it just got the morning sun that was not too hot. The afternoon sun was on the other side, so they were in the cool shade.

M: How did the women get their babies up there?

R: I think these women that organized the thing took them up there, I'm not sure. That wasn't our problem--our problem was to take care of them.

M: And were the babies there permanently or did the mothers...?

R: Oh no; no, no. As soon as they got better, we sent 'em home and took some others.

M: I see.

R: But I'd say a hundred babies. It was probably maybe 200, 'cause it was full all summer.

M: Could you tell me about the conditions in South El Paso at that time, the Mexican American community, the health, the problems over there?

R: Well, they lived in these tenements, and very few of 'em had any refrigeration of any kind. Of course, at that time, the refrigeration was ice, there was no electric refrigerators. And the living conditions were bad in this way: the buildings were inadequate, the toilet facilities were bad (one toilet facility maybe for two or three apartments). And infections just naturally came because of the living conditions and the heat. And the food spoiled; they just had no way of taking care of it, except to wrap wet cloths around it, which didn't take care of it. It may be that the heat had something to do with the high mortality--I just couldn't say about that. But it was cool up there [at the baby san]. That may have helped.

M: Did you do a lot of work down in South El Paso in those days?

R: Oh, I practiced down there.

M: You practiced down there?

R: Oh, yeah.

M: Did you have an office down there?

R: No, no, in town.

M: But you had patients down there?

R: Oh, yeah.

M: Well, these people must have been very poor.

R: Yes. I think the average labor wage was about a dollar a day. Of course, in 1922 that would equal five or six dollars now. But the pay was poor, which was a blot on the history of El Paso. They were trying to attract industry here with the lure of cheap labor.

M: Did these people have trouble paying for health services?

R: Oh, yes. They had no money to... Oh, occasionally they'd pay you 50¢ a call to go down there and see someone.

M: You must have made a lot of free calls.

R: Oh, goodness, yes. But personally, I just never had any desire to be rich. Money made no difference to me--if they could pay, all right; if they couldn't, all right. That's the way I was taught, and that's the way I practiced.

M: Do you recall any incidents that stand out in your mind treating people down in South El Paso back in those days?

R: I do recall being called down there for a young Negro boy--oh, it was about one o'clock in the morning--and they said he was dying. Well, I went on down there. And he had apparently an intestinal obstruction, he was bloated up. And [it] turned out that he had a high fecal impaction, we call it. He hadn't had a bowel movement in several days. So I asked 'em, "Anybody have a enema syringe around here?" They routed around and found one. And I gave the boy an enema. Ooh, and he got cleaned out in no time--just went down [and] felt all right. Oh, there were about a dozen, maybe a dozen and a half neighbors and relatives in the house. It was in a tenement. And when the boy said he felt all right, they asked me how much they owed. I said, "Well, up across the tracks I charge \$5.00 for a night call." They

said, "All right," and they passed the hat around among 'em. It was an enormous [sum]. I said, "Now, that's more than \$5.00." "Well, you take it, you saved the boy's life." I got home. When I counted [it], it was \$17.00 in loose change.

M: \$17.00, imagine that!

R: Yeah. Well, that's how grateful they were. Although the treatment was simple, the condition was simple--it took no knowledge or anything. If they'd just done that themselves, they could have avoided calling me.

But I went down there in the South end of town at night, all hours of the night, between these tenements [where] space was maybe three feet and dark as pitch. I never thought a thing about it, as regards being held up or something. And one local doctor went down there one night on a false call, and he was held up and robbed.

On another occasion, I went down there, just about dusk, to see a fellow over on Canal Street. I went over and saw him. And at the side of the street of the El Paso Laundry down there, the street was unpaved, and I was stopped halfway back to Santa Fe Street. I had another call to make and got out my book. I had an old Model T Ford, I think it was, and the window was open. You know, there was a running board or foot board on all of 'em. And some fella jumped up on that thing, and he had a knife--I think it was a yard long. And he reached in and made a lunge at me, never said a word! And I just pushed the gas [pedal] and sprawled him all over the street. He didn't hit me, because I pulled over, and he couldn't reach that far. But anyway, I called the police about it, and they said, "Well, of course, we can never find the person down there. But if you have any calls in South El Paso below Overland Street during the darkness of the night, call us and

one of us'll go with you." I said, "Gee, is it that bad?" "Well, it could be." So I was very careful after that about calls that I took down there. I thought, "Gosh, if it's that bad, I won't go at all. I don't want to get killed."

That was one incident that happened. And during Prohibition, a local attorney called me early one Sunday morning. It was still dark--oh, around four o'clock I would say. And at that time, there were a lot of rumrunners, you know, during Prohibition, and they were bringing liquor across the river. All they had to do down in that Chamizal area, that Chamizal island... They had changed the course of the river, making a big bend, and cut across. That left that area of Mexico on this side. [So] all they had to do was cross the river, which was usually entirely empty or very little water. They would cross it, and they were still in Mexico, on this side. [They would] sneak across a dry, nonexistent border and they were in El Paso.

Well, anyway, this attorney told me that one of their clients was a rumrunner and they got into a hijacking gang. The hijacking gangs were gangs that were organized, and they would jump these rumrunners, beat 'em up or run them away, and take their contraband. "Well," he said, "one of them got cut up last night. Would you go down and take care of him?" "Yes, I will. Where do I go?" [He] said, "Well, you go down to Santa Fe Street and the canal, and there'll be a car"--all this mysterious talk--"there'll be a car waiting there. You leave your car there and the man will take care of it. Get in this other car, and he'll take you where this man is."

Well, I did that, and he drove around various ways, he didn't take a direct drive. Finally, [we] landed up in a tenement over there. Well, this fella had...not severe cuts. I put him on the kitchen table--we always carried

first aid stuff--and sutured him up. Then the leader of this rum-running gang [said], "How much do I owe you?" And he pulled out a wad of bills that would choke an ox, 'cause there was good money in that rum-running. And I've gorgotten what he paid me, \$15.00 I guess, and he gave me two bottles of tequila. Now, I never did much drinking, I didn't care for the tequila. But I hated not to take it because I was afraid they wouldn't trust me. And these Border Patrolmen and Prohibition officers were roaming around there. I was afraid if I did take it, I'd get caught, and I'd be out to luck. But I took it anyway. They took me back where my car was and that was it. Well, I must have done that six or eight times, that same procedure. Some of them were badly cut up, and they'd pay me more. And no Prohibition officer ever stopped me!

M: Well, you were lucky.

R: Yes.

M: Did you also practice medicine in Juarez?

R: Yeah, I sure did.

M: Did you cross a lot of times down there?

R: Well, the bridge.

M: How did it work? Did people call you from over there?

R: Yes, yes. It was nothing...no interference by authorities. I got so I knew them pretty well. And you'd go over the Stanton Street Bridge and come back the old Santa Fe, the old wooden bridges. There were some foreigners living over there that were directed to come up to Juarez. One gentleman here, he had left his wife and daughter when the daughter was just a baby. He came over here and wanted eventually to live here. And some steamship company in Warsaw--they were Polish--told the woman to take their steamship

to Tampico or Veracruz (one of those), then come up to Juarez and you could get in without any trouble. Well, when they landed in Juarez, the quota was out, and they were in trouble; they wouldn't let 'em come over.

Well, they had a daughter, a very brilliant girl, and she became a patient of mine. Occasionally we would, oh, have to bring one over to have glasses fitted or dental work or something that wasn't done in Juarez. The procedure was simple, as far as I'm concerned. I'd simply call the Immigration people and say, "I have so-and-so in Juarez, and I have to bring him over here to have some special work done." "All right. You gonna bring him over, and you're gonna take him back?" "Yes." "All right." That's all there was to it. We always took 'em back, of course. But, they never questioned us in any way, the authorities.

M: Was there a shortage of medical services in Juarez?

R: Oh, it was poor. I don't know whether [there was a] shortage, but the well-to-do people over there didn't...

M: They didn't suffer.

R: No. Of course, they were able to come over here--I mean, [through] influence or something. And a lot of people came over and worked, but they had working passports, and never had any trouble.

M: Dr. Rheinheimer, do you recall the little settlement over here on the north side that they called Stormsville?

R: Sure do.

M: What can you tell me about that place? What do you recall?

R: It was a settlement up where the Rim Road is now. And the only way you could get up there was a dirt road going up Stanton Street, then turn to the right and you were there. There was no Kern Place, none of that, just this

settlement on top called Stormsville. And I think his name was Dan Storms, the fella that owned it. They had a church; I don't remember whether they had a grocery store. But it existed there for a long time, until somebody bought it and developed it, and turned it into lots and sold what is now the houses on Rim Road.

M: About how many people lived there?

R: Oh, I don't think too many, maybe three or four hundred.

M: Small community?

R: It [was] just small, yeah.

M: Did you ever practice medicine there? Did you make visits?

R: I don't recall that I did. Maybe a time or two, I'm not sure. I know I was over there at times. Whether to see patients or just curiosity, I don't know.

M: I understand that was a very poor community, too.

R: Yes, yes it was--about equal to South El Paso at that time. But as far as I know, they had no medical problems.

M: What were the diseases that prevailed in the poor sections of El Paso back in those days?

R: Same that prevailed in the better sections--pneumonia, typhoid, and smallpox. Of course, these enteritis, these intestinal diseases in the summer, but that was cleared up in the winter. But pneumonia was our, oh, the worst thing we had, and it was the old lobar pneumonia type. There were no antibiotics, no treatment of any kind, just support the patient and hoped he would live. On the fourth or fifth day, they had what they called a crisis in that kind of pneumonia--the temperature fell suddenly to normal, from maybe 103° or 104° and they became very weak. But if they survived the crisis, why, we

were happy. Then, there was typhoid fever, that was quite prevalent; and smallpox.

M: Did you lose a lot of patients down there?

R: To pneumonia, yes; the mortality was too high--not only there, but everywhere.

M: But, of course, especially there, conditions would be worse.

R: Yes. But, oh, all up the river, they were draining their sewage into the river. And there was typhoid all the way from here to Albuquerque up the river valley. I got typhoid myself, drinking water out of the river. That was before I was practicing medicine.

M: As a boy?

R: Yes, the year I graduated from high school. There was nothing down in the river bottom, just brush and trees--no houses, nothing--and we used to hunt down there. And the only water available was that [that] was in the river. And I drank some one morning, and promptly got a mild case. But it knocked me out of a year of going to school, medical school.

M: Now, what about venereal disease? Was that a problem?

R: Well, yes and no. I never treated too much of it. If it came my way, yes, I did--and all the doctors. There were a couple of, oh, part specialists in Urology. I never cared too much about treating [it], because it was unsatisfactory, both gonorrhea and syphilis. I don't think it was any more prevalent than it is now. Course, down in the lower part of town, it was just like everything, it was more prevalent because they were not hygienic, they didn't take care of themselves.

M: I did some research in the newspapers and there was one occasion in 1931 when a prominent doctor here in El Paso made a statement that the people from the other side of the border coming to El Paso should not be allowed

to cross, because, in his opinion, over 90 percent of them carried venereal disease with them.

R: Well, that's a possibility. But there was a public health service along the border then, and if they caught 'em, they would send them back. But the big thing was glaucoma, searching for that. But if they had any infectious disease, and they went through the public health service inspection, if they detected it or caught it, they couldn't let them over. I wonder who that doctor was?

M: I have his name in that little newspaper clipping.

R: About that time we were letting up on our visits to Juarez to see patients. They were getting strict about it.

M: About not letting you cross, you mean?

R: To treat patients.

M: Who was getting strict?

R: The Mexican authorities. For instance there were, oh, a lot of American doctors with the mining companies in Mexico, and I guess about that time Mexico passed a law requiring a Mexican doctor also be employed. He did no work, but they had to satisfy the law, these mining companies. So they hired a Mexican physician to be assistant, but he did nothing. Then finally, they required that a doctor practicing [in Mexico] had to have a Mexico license. And the requirement was that you had to graduate from one of the medical schools in Mexico, and then take the exam in Spanish. Well, all the doctors got out. And that's still in existence.

M: We've had a problem here historically with all the GIs who were stationed in this area going over to Juarez and contracting venereal disease. Have you been close to that problem?

R: No, because it was handled by public health authorities. They had this encampment down here that, oh, they must have had 100,000 soldiers--this is World War I. They did contract venereal disease, but there was an Army medical rule, that they had to go to a prophylactic station. The penalty was quite severe. If they didn't report and they developed a venereal disease when they got back here, they were court-martialed, I know. But if they had reported to a prophylactic station and had the evidence and developed venereal disease, it was simply loss of pay for a certain length of time, but they didn't court-martial them. They tried to be very strict about it, but they couldn't control it any more than they [are] controlling it now.

M: Did you deliver a lot of babies at home?

R: Oh, all of them! Very few in the hospital. Very few.

M: When did you start delivering kids?

R: When I came back here in 1917. Then I went away in the Army, but constantly after early 1919. Oh, heaven sakes. We would take care of the mother, prenatal, as best we could--some of them never did report for examination--and deliver the baby, and often had to wash the baby 'cause there was no one around there to do it. And we were lucky if we got \$25.00. That was the standard fee. I don't remember any particular difficulty during that time. Of course, some of 'em we took to the hospital and delivered them. Incidentally, oh, I guess it was two or three years ago, I found a schedule of hospital fees. A private room was \$5.00 a day, and a ward was three and a half. That included medicines, board, and room. And if they had to have an operation, the operating room fee was, I think, \$10.00. Delivery room, I think it was five. And that was a hospital right here in town--

Hotel Dieu. That was the schedule of fees. Can you imagine that, compared to now.

M: Quite a difference. Do you recall any special situations that came up in connection with delivering babies at home?

R: No. Usually there was some neighbor woman or several there to help you. But they'd call; and I'd get there to the house, and there was nothing available. Course, we carried instruments, but they had to be boiled, and water had to be boiled to make it sterile. Well, we more or less had to do that ourselves.

M: So things generally went pretty routinely for you.

R: In cases like that? Yes.

M: Now, I want to ask you some questions about the Depression years. How was El Paso affected here and the people that you were close to, delivering health care to?

R: Well, it's the same here as it was all over the country--they couldn't pay, so we just took care of 'em anyway and knew good and well we weren't gonna get paid.

M: How did you support yourself?

R: Oh, well, there was enough...

M: There was enough of a volume of business?

R: Our office room rent was \$25.00 or \$30.00 a month, and we could collect enough to pay that, and some over. Some people had saved money, and they were able to pay, but not too much. A lot of doctors just couldn't pay their rent, [but] the landlords didn't put them out--wouldn't done any good. So they just let them stay, hoping that maybe they'd pay the back rent. I don't know how many did it. I was able to keep up, I didn't starve. And

most of them were [able to earn a living]--there was enough.

M: Do you recall any incidents that stand out in your mind from that period?

R: No, nothing particular. Course, we had the Southern Pacific hospital work in our office, and we were paid for that. They did cut the salaries, but then that saved the day for the few of us that were doing that work. That's one way I got along. The pay wasn't much, but expenses weren't much either.

M: What about Mexican American doctors? Were there any around in those days, in the late teens, '20s, '30s?

R: Yeah, they were beginning to come in about that time. But before that there were very few. I knew three or four or five of 'em. They were good doctors--not scientific, none of us were scientific back there. We had none of this sophisticated diagnosing equipment at that time. We had to use intuition and experience and so on to carry us through. But we did fairly well, our mortality wasn't too bad, really.

M: Why were there so few Mexican American doctors?

R: I don't know. Of course, there were doctors in Juarez. But as I say, the well-to-do people never patronized them, they came over here.

M: Did you have patients from Juarez who regularly came to see you?

R: Yes, yes I did. And I had patients that I'd go over there and see. Now, we made a lot of house calls. In fact, [even though] I don't have much practice now anymore, some old people, they just can't come to the office, and I go to see them; right now.

M: You still go to see them?

R: Yeah. They're old, just like I am, tottery old folks. They just can't come to the office, that's all there is to it. Most of them go to the clinic at Thomason General. Of course, Army people go to Beaumont.

M: Could you tell me about the El Paso County Medical Society--how it got started and how it has evolved over the years?

R: It was chartered in October, 1898. I have a list of all the doctors that chartered it. There were, as I recall, 24 members, and the average attendance per meeting was, I think, ten.

[Pause]

M: Just a final question, Dr. Rheinheimer. The medical profession in El Paso is much different now than it was back in the teens and '20s, when you started practicing. Have you seen a lot of improvement over the years in medical services in El Paso?

R: Oh, gracious, yes. It has become, as I say, a science. And [they] make more sophisticated diagnoses and things that we didn't even know about back there in those days--for instance, brain surgery, heart surgery. They're saving a lot of lives that we just couldn't treat [then]. [We] trusted to God's good grace and luck to get through with it. But we didn't do too badly, our mortality wasn't too bad in ordinary run of cases. But now, they take severe heart cases and keep 'em going for years by heart surgery, and lung surgery and all that. When I came back home--this was my home, you know--we had very little x-ray help, just mostly in fractures; but for lung x-ray, stomach and all that, we didn't have it, and now they do. Oh, there's been a big change! It's gradually getting more scientific.

M: A lot more hospitals now?

R: Yes, and they're all well equipped--Providence, Hotel Dieu, this new Sierra, Eastwood Hospital, St. Joseph. Southwestern doesn't have as much scientific equipment, but all these others have heart cathertization and heart surgery, all that stuff. Also the Beaumont; of course, that's the best equipped in

town. That's Army. Yeah, they're all good. The trouble is, we just have too many beds right now.

M: That's become a problem.

R: Yeah. But it's been sometimes a rather abrupt change--evolution rather than a revolution. Most procedures reported in medical journals [were] all of a sudden. Of course, the work had taken several years, but had not been recorded or printed; and all of a sudden some clinic or something would come out with something new. But most of it was gradual.

M: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about to conclude this interview?

R: Oh, nothing that I [can] think of offhand.

M: I want to thank you very much for your time. It's been a very interesting conversation.

R: Thank you.