

1-1-1983

Interview no. 630

Fred R. Ponce

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Fred R. Ponce
INTERVIEWER: Fred Canales
PROJECT: Class project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: _____
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: No tape, transcript only
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 630
TRANSCRIBER: _____
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Mexican immigrant.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Life of a Mexican immigrant.

Length of Interview: _____ Length of Transcript: 8 pages

FRED R. PONCE

I was born in 1870 in a small town near the city of Chihuahua, Mexico and I grew-up there on an hacienda owned by my parents. My father was a farmer and cattle rancher. We always had several head of cattle, milk cows, horses, goats, chickens, and dogs. My parents were always hard workers and were conservative and productive and saved their money. My parents were born and grew-up in this same city. My parents were of similar background and knew each other since childhood days. I had very little schooling and I worked hard as a youngster. My brother and sisters also worked very hard and very productive. We had to start our day early every morning. I milked cows and picked eggs daily. I also raised vegetables and cleaned the barn yards and worked with the animals and did miscellaneous farm chores. Our entire family worked very hard during those early years in Mexico. I did a lot of farming and later got involved in a shoe store business in downtown Chihuahua City. We invested our money in a shoe store in partnership with a man who was very knowledgeable and experienced in the shoe business. I mainly provided the money (capital) and my junior partner the expertise/management to run the shoe store. My partner had the expertise to run the shoe business and he handled the store accounting and store business. I was the silent partner and spent a lot of my time with my farm/ranch matters, while he devoted all his time to the shoe store business. The shoe business was very successful because my partner was a good and dedicated

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business man who worked very hard at the shoe business. The shoe business ran for a few years and was growing successfully and it employed about 6 to 10 employees at all times. Gradually, my partner began to buy-out my portion of the business at a good profit to me and luckily I began phasing myself out of the business at about the right time in history, because of the Mexican Revolution. During the Revolution, Pancho Villa was taking many business/stores and farms away from business merchants and wealthy people and giving them to the poor people. (similar to Robin Hood in a way). He also destroyed many ^{FARMS} and burned many business and stores etc. Pancho Villa was lead to beleive that my partner was against him and Villa ordered his troops to burn down the shoe store. Afterwards when Villa found out my partner was not against him, he offered my partner to repay him for burning down the store. However, my partner (now the senior partner) refused Pancho Villa's money because he felt that Villas opposition would later consider him a Villa gang member and harm him or his family. Since my partner lived very near the store and felt he did not want to get involved in the turmoil caused by the revolution so he decided to move away to another city in southern Mexico. The insurance company told him they could not pay for the destroyed store because it was burned down in an act of war/aggression and the insurnance did cover damage/~~destruction~~ due to war or revolution. So we took a loss when Villa destr~~oyed~~ our store, however my loss

was relatively small because my partner had already bought most of my interests and I had made a large amount of profit out of the deal. So actually I did not lose much when Villa destroyed the store. My partner left and I never saw him again.

After the store burning incident, I devoted all my time to my farming and ranching and could see that I should sell my cattle and livestock and prepare to come to the United States. Accordingly, in 1916 I began to silently phase-out of the farming/ranch business and I sold a lot of my property and animals/livestock and attempted to sell my farm house because I was ready to come to the United States.

I had years earlier, removed our money from the bank, since I never did trust banks especially with the revolution, banks were no good and not reliable in my opinion.. We had our money secretly hidden on the farm and only my wife and two sons knew where the money was hidden. Things were frantic and the revolution in Mexico was doing a lot of damage to people and property in Mexico.

So a few months after our store burned down, Pancho Villa and his troops came out to our hacienda and he took the few horses and cattle I had left and he took over my property by force of gun point and he threatned to kill me. Villa said I was a wealthy land owner and that he was taking my land by force of gun-point. Villa said he was going to kill me that day and he ordered me to stand against a wooden fence so I could be shot. Luckily, at

that instant, my little daughter (age 7) a very cute little girl ran out crying to Pancho Villa and pleaded for him to spare her father's life. Pancho Villa held the little girl in his arms and apparently must have felt a sense of compassion for her and told her, "don't worry Chiquita - I will not harm your father". So thanks to my little girl crying and pleading to Pancho Villa my life was spared and felt very lucky to be alive and I was thankful to leave the farm with my "skin". So Villa allowed us to leave the farm with one horse and one wagon. We loaded-up the wagon that day and we departed the farm late that day. We departed without our money which was hidden in small farm storage barn. We could not take our money with us because Villa's men were watching us very closely as we packed our belongings in the wagon and they would have taken our money if they only had known we had any money or valuables. Accordingly, the following day was Sunday and most of Villa's men had either gone home or to church and only two of Villa's men remained on our property and my oldest son was able to return to the farm and he was able to get all our money out of the barn and he brought the money to me at a designated location. So we were lucky to get all our money out of the farm house without Villa's men knowing about it. My son had taken them some tacos and beer and they were real happy about that and did not notice what my

son was doing and according to my son, "they could have cared-less." My son said they were rather inefficient and self-serving troops and that was to our advantage. So we can thank God we were able to get our money out of farm/hacienda.

When my son brought me the money, I divided it up among my six children just in case Pancho Villa would later try to rob us. I did not want to "put all my eggs in one basket" and I felt that if we were robbed, they would not expect the children to be carrying money and thus would not even search them.

We were now on our way out of Chihuahua and well on our way to Juarez. We had a good trip with no problems we arrived in Juarez, along with many other people in our similar circumstances. Many people wanted to leave Mexico and come to the United States for the same reasons as our family. When we arrived in Juarez we were able to rent a small two room house. We lived in Juarez for a few months and my children enrolled in school.

So after a few months in Juarez we moved to the United States, we moved to El Paso, Texas in 1916. There were many Mexican people moving to the United States during this period, mainly due to poor economic conditions/un-employment and political turmoil/problems in Mexico.

After we arrived in El Paso and was able to get immigration clearance, my oldest son applied for a job as a laborer with the

Southern Pacific Railroad working on railroad maintenance between El Paso and Deming, New Mexico. He got the job and encouraged his younger brother to also apply for a job. He did apply but was not hired with the railroad. During this period and also in later years, mexican immigrants were hired only as laborers and only at hard menial tasks with very little pay. The women were hired as maids, sewing jobs, or hard menial tasks also with little pay. The employere discriminated against the Mexican immigrants and took advantage of them and payed them very little and in most cases exploited them for whatever they could.

I applied for a job at ASARCO (American Smelting & Refining Company) and I was not hired because they had too many other Mexican applicants and not that many job opportunities. However, I was not that concerned because I had a good amount of money and wanted to invest in a business. I got my opportunity when I met a man with experience and expertise in the macaroni business. So I supplied the money(capital) and started a macaroni factory on San Antonio street west of downtown El Paso. My friend with the expertise became my manager and he set-up and headed the operations of the factory while I handled the sales and marketing operations of the business. I also used my children and nephews to work in the factory. My sons were truck drivers and delivered the macaroni products to the stores

and so the business became a family business. The business was a success and continued to grow and is now been purchased by R-F Macaroni Products and moved to a new location in another city in 1960. (*Moved to St. Louis.*) -

I was fortunate that I was able to run a successful business and provide employment to my entire family because employment opportunities for mexican-americans and mexican immigrants were relatively few and work conditions were inferior for mexicans and their was a lot of social/educational/economic discrimination during the first ⁸ eithy years of this century and much of it exists today and will continue to exist, unfortunately.

Our religion is Baptist, although all our friends and neighbors were catholic in religion.

The Mexican people stayed together living in *the* south El Paso area, the smelter area, the lower valley or Sunset Heights area. We lived in the nicer Sunset Heights area where the wealthier Mexicans lived.

I have worked all my life and was fortunate enough to have money so my family did not have to struggle very much when we came to the United States. With my macaroni factory I was able to employ my family in the successful business. I have never regretted coming to live in the United States. My children gained many opportunities and completed their school

and academic goals in the United States. There is no question in my mind that if we had remained in Mexico we would not be as well off, "in any sense of the word." The economic/political unrest and many other social problems would have worked to our detriment and we and many others would not have had the opportunities that we derived here in the United States. I realize there is a lot of discrimination here against the Mexican people, however this is the most democratic country in the world and a lot better than any other country in the world. Accordingly, I am very happy to have become an American Citizen in the greatest land on earth.

I would like to have seen more information on her personal life? How of her children after they grew up?
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