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Interview no. 641

Gerardo Chávez

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Gerardo Chávez (1952-)
INTERVIEWER: Judy Ann Fuentes
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 24, 1979
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 641
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TRANSCRIBER: Judy Ann Fuentes
DATE TRANSCRIBED: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Migrated to the border in 1962 at the age of ten; educated in both Mexican and American schools; received a B.S. degree at U.T. El Paso; presently is a Spanish teacher.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biographical data; life of his family on an hacienda before the Mexican Revolution; life on a small village in Mexico where he grew up; migration to the border area; problems in the classroom with native speakers of Spanish; Border Spanish; life in the United States compared to life in Mexico; feelings upon becoming a United States citizen.

Length of Interview: 1 hour Length of Transcript: 13 pages

Gerardo Chávez
by Judy Ann Fuentes
March 24, 1979

F: Give some details about your background, parents, where you grew up.

C: I was born in 1952 in Guadalupe Victoria, Durango, in central Mexico. Out of five children, I was the only one born in a hospital. My mother paid with two chickens and a sack of the farm's harvest crop or crop of the yearly harvest. My grandmother was of indigenous heritage. She lived in Villa la Hacienda de la Colorada, In Zacatecas. The hacienda could be compared to a modern farm system working for a fraction of the harvest crop. She recalls the men's dressing or way of clothing as being a type of underwear; ladies wore long dresses. She told us of an epidemic which caused the death of many people. Her brother--I do not remember the date--died in the epidemic along with many of his friends and was buried in a mass--in a hole made by the people. In the same area of Zacatecas, there were other Indian groups more primitive than her own group and more dangerous and they normally came down upon nearby villages killing, raping and stealing. At the age of 16 my grandmother was married to a light-skinned man. He might have been a Spaniard or criollo. Her family did not allow her husband, at the time of the marriage, to enter her house because she was a virgin, which was the custom at that time.

The campesinos would be allowed to buy at the tiendas in the haciendas or the people in charge, or the owners. My grandmother's first child was my mother, Amparo. She left the hacienda, her husband was left behind. They placed their belongings, which weren't many, on a burro and walked to La Hacienda del Pedregal, which was in the nearby state of Durango. At that time the hacienda was deteriorating because of the Revolution, led by Zapata, Villa and many others. She recalls

that the revolutionists would not only raid the haciendas but also raid the peasants themselves. During the raids they would hang most of the hacendados for the atrocities that had occurred in the past. The revolutionists were helping the campesinos, but as mentioned, along with trying to establish new reforms they would rape and pillage their own pueblo people.

The Revolution ended, the Hacienda Pedregal was transformed into the village of Calixto Contreras, named after a hero of the Revolution. Now, the land was turned over to the government and later loaned or portioned out to the people who lived around the general area. As soon as they left or neglected their work the land would be taken away. The harvest would now go to the people, debts not to be paid to the old hacendados because in fact they had been abolished or hanged. My grandmother remarried a revolutionist who settled down, gave birth to four more children, three girls and one boy. My grandfather lived in the village and had his land just like everyone else, and along with the land had three special horses. His only son received a portion of land at the age of nineteen.

My mother Amparo Márquez Chávez, married a man from a nearby village, Pino Suárez, better known as Pinos. She gave birth to four children in the natural sense, supposedly by witchery. In a cantina, my father and his comrades killed a man, knifed him to death in an ordinary brawl, which was very common at that time, probably still today. The village police caught his comrades but my father fled and was never captured up to this date. He was charged with desertion of the scene of the incident and in fact was named as the only murderer involved. At this point my mother discovered a new pregnancy, this pregnancy...I become involved, I was the fifth child. My family remained in Guadalupe Victoria until I was eight or so, moved on to something better.

Still, going back to explaining life in the village, when I was growing up we literally lived off the land. We grew our own vegetables, owned cows, a few chickens, and other types of animals. We would make a few dollars or pesos of the harvest. We would go to the city, about the size of Canutillo, Texas. The money from the harvest would last normally until the next harvest, in good years. Items like clothing, work tools, kitchen goods, would be bought during the sale of the harvest. Normally, the harvest provided money, a bit of money for food that could not be grown. Shoes were made out of skins made by the people themselves--the older people teaching the younger--which were very comfortable and practical. In fact, at this point the older people today still wear those types of sandals. The equipment was primitive according to a modern standard of life, but very up to date according to theirs. The equipment was an old fashioned plow pulled by a team of horses or mules, or burros, whatever available, sometimes oxen. One of the older men would guide the plow into the dirt and guide the team to make the straight rows. Younger people would walk behind dropping seeds of whatever crops was being grown. At the time when pastures were not good for grazing, cows, sheeps /and other animals/ were taken up to the nearby mountains for a period of time, three to six months. There the people would build small huts, straw huts, and stay there for the rest of the months until the pastures in the lower vally were green enough for grazing. At that point the animals were brought back. Life on the mountains was beautiful, by no means was it a job, it was an undertaking that had to be realized year after year --once again because in the mountains the grazing was better during that time of the year. It was normally very green, enough water for human and animals to live. Cows would daily be milked and the milk would be sent down to the nearby villages to be sold. In this way the people in the mountains would keep in

touch with the people in the lower valley.

F: Would you tell us about where and when you attended school?

C: After leaving Guadalupe Victoria, we came to live in Juárez. I was enrolled in school while my family's papers were being handled or somehow being arranged so we could go to the U.S. After living in a rural area, Juárez seemed so different. We lived in a one-room house next to a couple of prostitutes, and on the other side a couple of homosexuals --the street which is called the Ferrocarril or Francisco Villa, which on this side properly known as Stanton Bridge or Santa Fe, one of the two. When we finally came to El Paso, I went to school for about 1 1/2 years and then moved to Odessa, Texas, about 300 miles east of El Paso. I finished high school and enrolled at UTEP, and at this point I have an Education degree.

F: Could you compare the school systems of the two countries?

C: The elementary school in Mexico seemed to be a little bit more advanced because of the simple fact that they obviously teach harder concepts at an earlier age. In the U.S. they were teaching the ABC's, while in Mexico I had been through a more advanced mathematical program and my vocabulary was advanced, in Spanish. The classrooms in Mexico were smaller, dirtier, not air-conditioned, and were fenced in. Textbooks were available, but made with cheaper type of paper, but the material seemed to be of high caliber. The content is what I am referring to. Basically, the concept I am trying to establish is that the Mexican elementary education program even though harder gave general students a better foundation in relation to the basic subjects. In coming to the U.S., I found this situation made the subject taught here a lot easier for me, once again because I had already had a more firm background, therefore I was a little bit more prepared than the other students here in the U.S. This is only a contrast and comparison, once again of elementary school standards. As

far as secondary schools, the U.S. surpasses the Mexican type of education. For what reasons, I have not come to a conclusion.

We came to El Paso and I was enrolled in an all-white school. So starting out was very strange to be surrounded by an all-white community. I obviously stood out. These surroundings were strange and harsh. The culture, people and language were very hard to become accustomed to. However, as I said before, the material in school seemed to be easy. Once again the idea was very obvious because my foundation was firm enough to take anything being thrown at me. On the first day of school, I was sent home to take a bath. Hygiene was something I had yet much to learn /about/. We were looked upon as immigrants. In general, they were curious and would come and ask questions we did not understand. Adjustments to the system was slow in as far as communication is concerned, so gradual in fact that I cannot even remember learning the language, the English language.

Everything on the U.S.A. was big, as they say in Texas, everything is big. Everything seemed to be new and fantasized. We kept old habits, like stealing, lack of cleanliness, and general prejudices of the white Anglo-Saxon. I try to keep as many of the traditions, concepts and ideologies as possible. A good example was my name, which was Gerardo, and it remained up to the end of grammar school, at which point I decided to change it to something much easier because so many people seemed to have trouble with it. My name eventually became Jerry, a very Americanized name. It seemed to be much easier for those who called on me. During this time before changing my name, I remember being taken to different classes hoping that someone, somebody, would be able to have the ability to pronounce my name correctly. Eventually, I gave up--Jerry was kept.

We moved to Odessa and were enrolled in a school which was 50 percent

black and 50 percent Mexican American or Chicano. In this situation the adjustment was easier and it is self-explanatory, but now we had to adjust or adapt to new Mexican concepts, the Chicano concept. The Chicano have a different idea of culture--not in the negative sense, but they just have their own philosophy. This philosophy did not go along with my type of rearing. This is what I had to learn before I established myself and became part of that same group. The reason why I feel they were different is because they did not have a full concept of what a Mexican truly was and were not quite in touch with the Anglo-Saxon type of culture. They were in the minority and they were in the lower economic level. Obviously, a trend I had to adapt. Eventually, I finished my high school years in Odessa, and because UTEP, university in El Paso was closest and also because it was so close to Mexico and would give me a chance to visit my relatives and visit my old culture, ultimately came and enrolled in El Paso. I graduated, earning my B.S. in Education.

F: Were you taught different interpretations of the important historical events of both Mexico and the United States?

C: In Mexico, we were taught a different history of the Revolution and importance of life, in contrast to the American, as any country will do, is to teach the positive aspects of wars and historical events. In fact this is what happened. Mexico was good, positive, and anybody else was a little bit on the negative side, including the U.S. The Mexicans in the concept of Mexican society were courageous, powerful, courteous, generous, and above all perfectly in the right. While on the opposite side, which was the U.S., the Anglo-Saxons, which is the majority in the U.S., were cowards, a greedy bunch of people and a being that normally deviated from all that was good and from the truth.

Now, we move to the American side, the schools taught that the Mexicans

were poor, weak, unorganized, and overall unmotivated. The Mexican government was supposedly possessing a weak concept of democracy, and that was probably true, at this point I can almost see their point of view that the democracy in Mexico is almost a farce if it's not, in its full sense of the word. Americans were to expand the concept of democracy to Mexico and to all states and nations, and Mexico needed the help of Americans.

F: What are you currently doing?

C: At this point, I am teaching at Coronado High, teach Spanish, and chose it for purely idealistic purposes. I came up with the idea of helping to educate the Chicano community, which may help them live a supposedly better life.

F: Do you, in the course of teaching Spanish, have any problems?

C: In the school I teach because it is predominantly white and because, as I stated, my main goal was to teach Chicanos, well, it is almost an irony because I hoped to help Chicanos and in fact the minority in this school is Chicanos. I was hoping for a larger group to help motivate. This small pocket of Chicanos come from a neighboring housing project or projects, and these are the students I normally aim my efforts. These Chicanos seem to be a little reluctant to trust teachers--not only myself, but everybody. They possess the same ability as other human beings, but are afraid to expose themselves. The Spanish class that I teach is a native speakers' class. This means that a person who can communicate in the Spanish language is placed in this type of an atmosphere. However, many students are erroneously placed in this classroom because they look Latin, whether they speak the language or not.

This is where we have a few problems. Basically what we have in the classroom is people speaking border Spanish, which is considered bad Spanish,

and also a group that speaks a Spanish that is more universally acceptable, that which I learned in Mexico and in textbooks. The bad Spanish I am referring to is the Border Spanish that most Mexican Americans speak and learn and not too many people besides themselves understand. This is why it is considered bad Spanish. The other is more universally acceptable because it is taught in Mexican schools and those texts come from Europe, Spain, from Madrid, and is understood all over the world.

F: Could you give some examples of bad Spanish or this Border Spanish?

C: General bad Spanish is called barbarismos--a term most people should learn. Barbarismos could be divided into three basic categories: arcaísmos, which is old usage, as the word indicates; the second are anglicismos, which is words which have become Americanized; and the third is pachuquismos, and these are terms invented by the Mexican Americans. Start with arcaísmos, which are old usage. A few examples are, in the past a Spanish speaker would say asina, now the appropriate usage is así. However, as I was saying, many people still use asina. Another example is that in the past one used to say lechi, and in fact the correct term is leche. Another term, an old usage, is nochi, modern usage is noche. Another term used in the past is juites, modern translation is fuiste. Many people say aigre instead of the correct term, which is aire. All fall under the basic category of old usage.

Anglicismos, the second sub-category, once again are words which for some reason have become Americanized. A few examples are the word to brake, in the anglicismo form is brequiar, which is a very bad form. The translation for to type becomes taipiar, and to shine becomes shainiar, to park becomes parquiar. Taking it from the top, instead of brequiar, it should be enfrenar; instead of taipiar it should be escribir a máquina; instead of shainiar, the correct form is dar lustre or bolear; and finally, instead of parquiar, it

should be estacionar. Or in fact, a more modern word for estacionar or parquiar, which has been pretty well accepted, is aparcar. The basic concept is that those words have been very well Americanized, from brake to brequiar and from shine to shainiar.

Moving to the third subcategory, which is pachuquismos, this is the slang which the Mexican Americans have created, neither Spanish nor American--it's simply their own dialect, terms that have been invented. Origin, no one really knows. We have some type of notion but... Well, here are a few examples. For house, the word becomes cantón or chante. Where that came from, I really don't know, maybe from the French. Girlfriend becomes jaina; mother is jefa; father is jefe; friend becomes compa; guy or man, boy, is bato; and girl is bata; bike becomes juila; and car becomes ranfla. All of these terms do not make sense to speakers of the Spanish language in other countries because they have been created for the usage of the border Mexican American atmosphere. The basic problem is that those speakers of a universally acceptable Spanish simply have to develop a more enriching vocabulary, have to expand on what they already know. However, those speakers of the Spanish from the border who have problems of anglicismos, arcaísmos, and pachuquismos have to overcome that somehow and start from scratch. They have to learn new terms to take the place of that Border Spanish, which is not accepted or understood by other Latin countries. So we have different objectives for these two groups.

In order to teach Mexican Americans we have to take that Spanish which they know and teach them new and more accepted terms, by no means telling them to forget their own language--which is not really bad, it's simply a language which they themselves understand and they may be the only ones that understand it. They can keep their language, but we do suggest that they learn the language which more countries use and understand.

[PAUSE]

- F: Do you have any criticisms of the way you are being asked to teach Spanish to students in a native speakers' class?
- C: Yes, I have a few criticisms. The school system categorizes the students simply on their surname basis, or simply because their last name is Latin they feel that they belong in the native speakers' class, which is erroneous. Many students are placed and in fact the outcome is negative. They find themselves in a dilemma of not understanding the Spanish language that I intend to teach, because the native speakers' class is more advanced than Spanish I teach for non-native [speakers]. They find themselves frustrated, they give up, and in fact do poorly. My own teaching training did not aim at the teaching of native speakers, of Hispanics, Chicanos. My formal education was mainly based or directed toward the education of those non-native speakers or foreigners. I was prepared to teach Spanish as a second language, not Spanish as a developing language for Spanish speakers, therefore I have to begin from scratch. Another problem is that not too many books or texts have been written for the native speakers. Once again my imagination has to be at work, sometimes it falls far from perfection. Another addition to the problems is that the native speaker not only has problems speaking their own Spanish language, but find themselves having problems with English. For some reason the schools do not recognize it, and even though many teachers are aware, at this point it is not very much we can do except attempt to develop their Spanish language, but what happens to the English? It's quite a job in the overall view.
- F: When did your family come to this area?
- C: My family came to Juárez from Durango in 1962 following my mother's footsteps, who had previously come here and taken five, six years to establish herself and learn a new way of life. At this point she called upon her family, five

kids, to join her and start the new life she hoped would be better for our upbringing. My first impressions of the big city of Juárez as compared to the little town of Guadalupe Victoria was quite different. Juárez was a big city, there were all types of differences. We found an introduction to drugs, prostitution, homosexuals, hoodlums, crowded areas, traffic and pollution--something we were not accustomed to. Later, we moved to El Paso del Norte, we saw a contrast from Guadalupe Victoria and Juárez or Mexico in general. In El Paso we got a taste of that great land of plenty, which is the U.S. Here we found cleanliness, well-structured buildings, strange and delicious food. Everything was super-extra-ordinary, futuristic or strange in a positive sense. A few instances, Durango and my home in Juárez were of adobe and seemed, in fact were, probably very imperfect, as far as structure is concerned. They would deteriorate by wind, rain, and nature, had holes in the walls, corners were run down--very imperfect. Television was another contrast, another invention we had to learn about. Another exciting introduction was that of Halloween, that was people actually giving out candy and goods for free --something we never saw in Mexico. The school buildings were clean and perfectly structured, buildings were straight. Before leaving Durango, I had no idea or preconception of what the United States would be like.

F: Having now lived in the U.S. for 17 years, what is your impression now of Guadalupe Victoria?

C: Going back to visit the old village, it still seems as backwards and primitive as always. People have finally been introduced to electricity and a certain amount of water system. However, since they're not accustomed to these new facilities, they very often go back to old ways of life, which is the usage of candles, lanterns, and a couple of wells available. Nature still provides a great percentage of their development and nurturing. They still depend on

providence. If it rains and the weather is good, the crop and future is good. When the opposite occurs, have a rough time during that year. At times I feel that I have lived through two centuries. My childhood was lived in the 19th Century and my adulthood in the 21st Century. It is as if I am living in the future. My perspective of life has been very much expanding. The people of Durango live only on a day-to-day survival basis, with no concept of a world beyond their region. In fact, it probably is better for them because life in itself is difficult enough.

F: If you had not migrated, what would you be doing now in the state of Durango?

C: Probably doing what everybody my age would be doing. I'd be married, I'd have a pregnant wife in the kitchen, five kids, not owning, just having my piece of land which would have to kept up or be taken away by the village council. At this time I would probably be preparing for harvest. From our point of view this type of existence may seem negative, however, from the viewpoint of the village of Calixto Contreras, this is the only life they know, and they have come to accept it and they enjoy it, and do not look upon it as a more difficult existence than anyone else's. In fact, they probably feel that a city life in the U.S. would be harder to cope with than their own. Their life in contrast to the hour to hour we have here, that we always have to keep up with the clock, seems harder to them because they simply take life as it comes. I try to portray their type as realistically as possible, but not negatively. If at this point I was to be living in that area I would probably truly be happy and contented with that type of existence and never think of migrating to the U.S. permanently. I may have had the idea of temporarily visiting the U.S. for economic purposes to get together an amount of money to go back to establish myself better, but never at any time would I think of abandoning my type of living, because it is beautiful in itself and

it is very acceptable to those who have lived it so long. They have their different frustrations, just as we have ours. While they have to worry about taking care of the land, we frustrate ourselves in keeping up with the household bills. Either way, living here or living there, I would be equally contented. The simple fact that I live here simply says that I live in a new world with a different set of rules, different set of concepts, but by no means do I live above or below them, I simply live differently. I am sure they feel the same way.

F: What is your current citizenship status in the U.S.?

C: I have been a citizen of the U.S. for about two years. I'm still learning as far as everything is concerned, basically about my new rights which I have acquired. I have much to learn, just as every citizen of the U.S., and more, since I have barely been accepted as part of the community of the nation.

F: How did it feel to be sworn in as a U.S. citizen?

C: At the time of the proceedings when I was asked to reject all of my loyalties and allegiances to Mexico, my past life seemed to have literally flashed before me. It was hard to accept the fact that a decision had to be made to become a citizen of the United States, reject a whole country and nation, which was Mexico; yet, that decision had to be made. Even though I decided to become a U.S. citizen I still feel as if I've never left Mexico, because logically, living in the border town or border area always so nearby it is hard to forget. The Southwest in the U.S. is almost like living in Mexico. The culture, language, religion, and philosophy seem to be about the same-- not exactly, but it goes hand in hand. The technological advances are modern, in fact, maybe too advanced. However, the geography, the geographical aspects of Mexico and the Southwest are basically the same, which allows me an atmosphere of Mexican heritage.