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Interview no. 668

Héctor Holguin

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Hector Holguin
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver and Vicki L. Ruiz
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 17, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 668
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 668

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Student at Texas Western College in the mid -1950s;
Chosen Outstanding Ex-student.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Why he attended TWC; Hispanic students on campus in the
fifties; Social life on campus.

Length of interview: 30 minutes

Length of transcript: 15 pages

R: When did you attend Texas Western and why did you decide to go there?

H: Well, I started college in 1953. At that time, it was very unusual for a Hispanic to leave town. I could not afford to go away to school. I knew I had to work; the only alternatives were Texas Western College or New Mexico State. At that time Texas Western only had 5,000 students; it had the feeling of a small community. You really got to know everyone and the classes were small. Once you got past your freshman year, the classes tended to be very small in engineering. We received a significant amount of personal attention from the professors and we had a lot of interaction with our classmates. I think that it was an excellent setting for learning. We had good professors, not only in engineering but in all of our basic courses. We attended classes at all parts of the campus but as engineering students, we had the tendency to remain isolated. Today many students have the opportunity for the first time to go to a Stanford, a Harvard or an M.I.T but I think that they are missing out on other things that are equally important. If they intend to come back and be a contributing member of this community, I think that UTEP is a better alternative; they can always go to the graduate schools of the Stanfords and the M.I.T.'s of this world.

C: Why did you decide to major in engineering?

H: Well, I always liked math. I wasn't really mechanically inclined, but I had the feeling that I liked to build things with a math background. I just naturally gravitated towards engineering. Engineering gives you

an excellent base; especially today, because you can move in so many different directions. In my case, I was able to move from aerospace, to consulting engineering, and then to a computer environment. Engineering continues to offer just excellent opportunities.

C: Were you in civil?

H: Yes

C: Tell me some of your favorite professors. Or professors that you remember that you didn't like, if you care to.

H: Well, my favorite was my next door neighbor Dr. Rentelin. He was a professor of metallurgy. I would like to tell two stories about him. I was not too interested in metallurgy, but it was a mandatory course. Dr. Rentelin being my neighbor, knew I had to do well in this course. I worked hard and I was doing all right. One day, he came up to me in class and asked how I was doing. I said, "Fine". And he said, "Well, what did you do last night? I didn't even remember, but I just started answering him: I think I said something like "I went out with some friends." And he answered "Well you must have had a good time because your quiz score for today was not very good". He had a way of needling you to excel in his course.

In my second year, I was having second thoughts about engineering; he was instrumental in coming in and you might say hitting me over the head with reality. I decided to go ahead and stick it out at a critical decision point in my life.

I remember another event that occurred in his class-room. One day the bell rang and nothing happened. He just kept on talking; finally, he caught on and he just said, "Hey, when the bell rings, you all walk out because I hear bells all the time". He came across as a very rough individual, but under that rough exterior was a gentlemen. He cared about teaching and I learned so much from him. We had many good professors there.

I'm sure that you have heard the stories about the alligators. College students were always playing around with the alligators in the downtown plaza. Before my time, a professor in the Geology department walked into his office and you can imagine his shock upon seeing an alligator that had been placed there by his students. I do remember going to campus one day and finding an alligator floating in our campus swimming pool.

C: Oh no!

H: They had to close down the pool. I guess the Health Department was a little concerned. How they got the alligator in there I'll never know.

C: Who did it, do you know?

H: Well, no, that was a pretty well kept secret. (Chuckles)

C: Was the pool covered at that time?

H: No, it was the outdoor pool.

C: So you lived at home?

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H: Yes.

C: Did you work while you were going to school?

H: Yes, I worked. It took me five years to get out, primarily because I was working.

C: That's the standard time length isn't it?

H: Well, yes. In engineering I think most students tend to take five years. You didn't have much time to work because an engineering load demands a lot of study time. I was fortunate because one of my uncles had a car lot; I used to go there and help out by selling used cars. This job taught me a lot about communications with people.

R: What high school did you graduate from?

H: El Paso High.

R: Did you have a car when you were going to school or did you get rides?

H: Well, my father made a mistake. When I was younger, everybody had scooters or bicycles. My father kept saying, "Well, when you get older and if you earn your money and you've got enough money to buy a car, we'll get you a car". So, early in high school I earned the money and he couldn't back down. I had a car in the last two years of high school.

R: That was really something then.

H: In those days it was really something. The thing to remember most about campus is that engineers tended to really stick to themselves. Maybe a few entered fraternity life, but I didn't see this happening within the civil engineering group that I associated with. We didn't really make time to participate in extracurricular activities. This isolation was a shame because I think that's a very important part of college life. At that time Hispanics were not allowed to participate in fraternities or sororities. But I don't think we felt excluded. I think it just wasn't important for us to participate.

R: Were you the first member of your family to go to college?

H: Yes, and I think that this is true for most of the Hispanics attending college.

R: Was there like a pride or like you knew you had to do it for your family, not only for yourself, but also for your family? Did you feel pushed by them in any way?

H: I think you develop a feeling and you carry it with you the rest of your life. You know that you have to work harder. I think that college just seemed to be out of focus for most of us. I was fortunate that it was important to my parents. Two of my uncles were college graduates; one was an architect and the other an engineer. I think that their influence also helped me to proceed with engineering. At that time, I don't really know what the Hispanic population was at UTEP. It certainly wasn't the 50 to 60 percent it is today.

C: Were you a member of the APO's?

H: No.

C: Back then, I thought it was the engineering group.

H: Yes, but I didn't belong. I think that most of our activities were centered around the Newman Club which was a Catholic organization on campus. We were also involved with the Civil Engineering Technical Society. We interacted with the professional community through this organization. We didn't have much time for anything else. I graduated in a class of twelve, so you can see that it was a very close-knit environment. I think that we had a special feeling of the campus. We could walk around and get to know everyone. It's just a very different atmosphere. I went to graduate school at UT-Austin. At that time it was only 25,000 students. It's twice that now. My first time on campus, I felt like a little ant. I was overwhelmed when I attended my first football game. I felt that I had lost my identity. There were so many people and you just felt like one of 100,000. It was very different. I don't know if I could have been as successful in undergraduate school in that large of an environment. There's so many activities at UT-Austin. There's so many things to do and so many distractions. I am glad that I went to UTEP where I could focus my attention on what we were there for.

C: What year did you go to UT-Austin?

H: I graduated from UTEP in June 1958 and I went immediately to summer school and spent the year 1959 in Austin.

C: We were there together?

H: Really?

C: Yeah, we were. Can you tell me if you felt any difference in people's attitudes toward Hispanics at UTEP and then when you went to Austin?

H: I think that if you had your antennas out, you could feel the discrimination. It's not just against Hispanics, some people are going to discriminate against anyone that doesn't fall into their mold.

C: I think that was the era when there was a lot of that anyway. I mean against just anybody that was different.

H: I don't think we were that far removed from the time that our buses said, colored section in the back or blacks could not go to local restaurants or theaters. We knew it was there. So I guess maybe my attitude was: we were here first and I never did let it bother me.

My first taste of it was when I was very young. I wasn't invited to certain birthday parties. After you go through it once or twice, you just sort of form a shield against it. At UTEP I think it was low key. I didn't really see a harshness to it. We knew that the fraternities and sororities were set up a certain way and we just accepted that as a way of life on campus. No one really came out and tried to fight the system or change it.

At UT-Austin it was a little harsher. For awhile, I was dating a sorority girl and it caused some problems in that environment. I think that it was more evident at UT-Austin than UTEP. I really wasn't an undergraduate; I think the undergraduate students would probably feel it more than we did in graduate school.

R: So, then during your college days you were not married, during your days at UTEP then, you were not married?

H: No, I didn't get married until age 28. I had been out of school about six to seven years.

R: Because it would have been very hard to get married and start a family with school?

H: It would be impossible. It would have been impossible for me. A very good friend of mine was married; he was extremely dedicated with a tremendous amount of energy. We all learned from him because he started the civil engineering program when he was 40 years old. His name was Louis De Panfilis. He had advanced through the ranks in the Army and he retired as a captain; he had been a professional boxer. He was quite a man and he came on campus and just took charge. He made our civil engineering student chapter #1 in the country. He was just that aggressive. I think that helped the younger people around him to mature a little faster. We had excellent professors, but I think that students tend to learn just as much from their cluster of classmates and friends.

C: Did you participate in St. Pat's Day?

H: Yes, but I made a mistake. I was working and I didn't make it to St. Pat's my freshman year. The next year they were out to get me because they knew that I hadn't gone, of course. I couldn't back down so I went. That's when you really test your friends. I think that I would still be in that mine today if it wasn't for Kiki Bustamante. Kiki was a good friend of mine and he finally got me out of there. If not, I would still be there crawling around.

C: Well, tell me about it. What did they make you do?

H: The mine was located at Oro Grande. We would start at the entrance to the mine. They would blindfold you and roll up your pant legs so you really didn't have much protection. Then, they would stuff tobacco, as much tobacco as they could in your mouth. It was very hard not to swallow. Many people got very, very sick; some of the tobacco was spiced with chili. We started out by crawling through the mine but you're constantly being stopped, at least I was. They would ask you questions, even if you gave the right answer, they would still give you a good solid hit in the behind with a wooden board. So it was quite an experience. It just seemed like we were in there forever. I went the following year and you can see that everybody's crawling, one behind the other. But there is enough room where you feel that you are wandering, not knowing where you are relative to the voices that you hear.

There are always some people who are waiting for a freshman that they want to take advantage of. They will take him off to a corner and really give him a very hard time. I guess looking back on it, it seems childish but I think it's an important tradition. I think it helped to bring people together and make them feel like, we have gone through this together.

When we came out of the mine, they told us to kiss the Blarney Stone; it was just a big rag with a tremendous amount of green paint.

C: Oh.

H: We were so happy to get out of there that we instantly forgot all the pain and the frustration. They still do a version of it, but I don't think that it can compare to being in the mine. I think it reminded us about the College of Mines and Metallurgy; it reminded us where the university really came from its roots, and how about our Bhutanese architecture! Not too long ago, we were very fortunate to visit a museum where we saw many pictures of this architectural theme. Looking at some of these photographs, I swear that I was looking at some of the buildings on campus.

C: Where was the museum?

H: It was in Amsterdam.

C: Really?

H: Um hum.

C: I'll de darned.

H: They had a section on Tibert and the Bhutanese arts and crafts.

C: That's really strange, you're in Amsterdam looking at Bhutanese architecture reminding you of El Paso.

H: Yes. That's right.

C: That's weird.

R: Was this hazing process only for engineering students?

H: No, it was the engineering, geology and metallurgy students. Freshman classes tended to be very large; however, attrition was very high and we would lose a lot of students in that first year. It was a shame to see someone drop out who had gone through this initiation. If they could get through that, I figure they should be able to get through engineering. But we did lose a lot of students in that first year.

R: Were there any women in these programs?

H: At that time, I just remember two women. They weren't in civil engineering. I think they were in electrical engineering, but that was very unusual.

R: Did they go through the hazing or were they exempt?

H: Oh, I think they went, they were pretty good about that. They were pretty tough individuals. They had a lot of determination.

C: They would have had to be, to be in engineering at that time.

- H: It was very unusual to see a woman in engineering. Today, 25 percent of the enrollment in engineering and computer sciences are women.
- C: You know, Linel says he doesn't even notice when there's a woman in his class anymore.
- H: Really?
- C: I say, "Well, that's 'cause you're getting old."
- H: Well, most of our people are graduates of UTEP and I'd say that many of our engineers are women and many of our programmers are women, so it's a different, totally different environment.
- C: Do you remember painting the green line or any of the activity on campus?
- H: Yes, that was very important to us; a tradition handed down from generation to generation. I don't really know the origin of the name "peedoggies"; it was important to remind ourselves that we were special but not an arrogant type of special. We just knew that we had to work harder and most of our activities were in that corner of the campus. We felt that this terrain was ours and that no one could cross that line. It was a tradition. El Paso High School is the oldest high school in town. The feeling of tradition is instantly visible just like at Bowie High School or the older high schools in town.

It takes many many years to develop that kind of tradition. I think that's what UTEP offers today. Its roots really go way back and there's a flow of tradition that is very important. In my business, I have traveled to many campuses. I've been to M.I.T., Stanford and Harvard; I just came from a visit to TCU and SMU. UTEP is very unique. It's a shame that we have a couple of buildings that stand out like a sore thumb. It disrupts the uniqueness of the Bhutanese architecture; we have a campus second to none.

C: What would you say the uniqueness of the character school is, or should be?

H: Well, I think that Dr. Monroe has an important priority to keep our best high school students at UTEP. Our best students tend to leave El Paso; they tend to find better opportunities outside of El Paso. It's a job not just for the University, but it's also a job for the community to keep our best students here. But, there's no point in keeping them here unless we can also offer them the best opportunities here. We have to be very aggressive, but also very careful to properly plan the future of this community. We have to attract the right kind of industries that can offer our graduates the optimum levels of achievement. We have many problems in that area. It is a shame to see our best students leave to Houston, Dallas, California, etc. I think there's been dramatic improvements in that area, but I think we've got a long way to go to change that.

C: Anything else, Vicki?

H: Let me think, can we stop it just a second?

[PAUSE]

R&C: Who did you go to school with who stayed in El Paso?

H: We had a good class. Only a few of them have remained. Humberto Sambrano is a very capable person. He was really my best friend in college and continues to be a very good friend. He's six foot four and another classmate, Bill Adorno, was also six foot four. I always walked between them with a feeling of being very short.

C: And you're tall.

H: Six feet. Humberto had served in the Air Force for four years; he was much more mature than I was and that helped. His maturity helped me to settle in a little faster than normal. Ed Babenco entered our class in the later years. He has his own construction company and again, a very good engineer. Ray McCormack has McCormack Construction Company, which is dedicated primarily to the installation of utility lines. I think everybody else left El Paso because of the limited opportunities. Initially I left El Paso and worked in California for six years. I didn't see the opportunities here and I think that's typical of what was happening at that time.

C: Why did you decide to come back?

H: Well, let me preface it. When I graduated, there were few major companies here in El Paso. We knew that they would not employ Hispanics so it even limited us further. With each generation, I saw changes and improvements. I went to California to work in aerospace for six years. I got married in 1964; my wife, Rosario,

is from Mexico City. Our roots are really here, not only in El Paso, but also in Mexico. Our first daughter was born and I had just finished the project I was working on. I knew that if I didn't leave then, it was going to be very difficult for me to leave later because of the many opportunities in California. They were a hundred fold more than El Paso. I knew I didn't want to bring up my family in California. I just didn't feel comfortable, so we packed up and just moved back. I'll never regret that decision. Even today, in our business everybody tells me, "Why aren't you in Houston or Denver or Atlanta?" But we find the world's getting smaller and we can work very nicely from El Paso. We have excellent people in El Paso.