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Interview no. 704

María De La O

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: María de la O
INTERVIEWER: Yolanda Flores
PROJECT: Class project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 6, 1977
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 704
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 704

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in México; immigrated during Mexican Revolution;
housewife and mother; lived in El Paso since 1916.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Life history of Mariade la O; recollections of Francisco
Villa; the Depression; Prohibition.

*Note:

The interview is mainly in Spanish but the transcript has been
translated into English.

Length of interview: 45 minutes Length of transcript: 13 pages

María de la O
by Yolanda Flores
December 6, 1977

F: Mrs. de la O, what is your birthdate and where were you born?

D: I was born in the city of Chihuahua, on the 13 of May, 1905.

F: What did your father work at?

D: At that time he had a bar and una sodería. We had to move from Chihuahua because Francisco Villa was going to attack Chihuahua. Some relatives of my mother sent a note that they were going to attack our house at 4:00 in the morning, so they advised my father [to leave], and that's why we came to Juárez. We stayed only one night and then we came to El Paso.

F: What year was this?

D: 1916. It was in November between the sixteenth and the twentieth; I really do not remember.

F: What do you remember about your childhood?

D: I have a lot of memories of my childhood because I felt very happy; my father had a very good position and we never had to go without anything that other children had because we had everything, thanks to our parents. My mother was in a good position, and she had maids and a lot of help.

F: So you had a nice childhood?

D: Yes, I had a very nice childhood.

F: Would you tell me about your school, where you went to school?

D: In Chihuahua or here?

F: Both.

D: Well, I started kindergarten when I was seven and it was too far from my home. It was a Catholic school. Then I went to Colegio Palmore, which was a college or something because we moved close to it. After we went away from Chihuahua we came to Juarez. My father was working for the railroad; he was a postal worker. He worked for the railroad all the time before he had the bar and soda company. Era agente postal. When we came to Juarez, he worked at Union Depot, but after that they passed a new law that all railroad workers had to live in the United States. My father tried to get the permit to come to El Paso, but they they took his passport because he had violated the law by living in Juarez and working in El Paso, and that was their motive.

Then we went to the Valle San Buena Ventura for one year, which was the time his passport was going to be held. It was almost a year when we returned to Chihuahua and then from Chihuahua we came over here to El Paso. That's when my father straightened everything out. The first day we arrived in Juarez it was nighttime and we stayed with some friends or relatives on my father's side, for one night, and then we passed the next day to my grandparents' house. They had also arrived in El Paso in 1916. That is all I remember about Chihuahua. I do remember a lot, but that was since I came.

When we came here to El Paso, my first school was San Ignacio, and then I attended El Corazon de Jesus.

After that, I was in Aoy School; then when they opened Burleson School, which is now Jefferson, [I went there]. And then we went to Lamar, which was the last school I attended.

F: What grade did you complete in school?

D: I only completed seventh grade.

F: When you were a teenager, what were your pastimes?

D: Well, when I was older, I started working, and I had a sweetheart. I worked in various places. When Kress re-opened after it had burned down, I worked there. After that I worked at the Goldolph Shoe Store, and then at the Texas Store because Mrs. Bocho was after me to work for her. But I didn't want to go because the store se me hacia quien sabe como, so I worked at the Texas Store until I got married.

F: What year did you get married?

D: I got married in 1931.

F: Before you got married how would you go out?

D: No, well in those days it was very different from today because I would go out with my sweetheart, very quiet and very respectable all the time. We would go driving. The young man I would marry bought a new car, and he gave me a set of keys so that I could use it. Every day after work he would come--he didn't have a regular job; he worked at his family's dairy--and we would go riding by a church, and daily he would come to my house. We would go out, many

times my mother would go with us and my sister Adela would also go out with me. She was terrible because she was so young and she asked too many questions. I dated several boys.

F: You say you came to El Paso because Pancho Villa was going to attack?

D: Yes, because Villa was going to shoot my father about 4:00 in the morning; they were going to take him out of the house. So then my father, since they had warned him that he should hide or leave if he could, decided to come. At that time there were no trains that came or went at certain hours. But since my father had worked in the postal section with the railroads, he was able to fix it so that they brought us to El Paso. When we arrived in Villa Ahumada there were troops of soldiers shooting after the train, but since it did not stop they could not catch up with us; and we arrived in Juarez and then we got off. There seemed to be thousands of soldiers shooting and the train was going real fast, and we were laying on the floor so as not to be hit by gunshots.

F: You told me that when you were in Columbus, New Mexico visiting some relatives, Villa was going to attack there also.

D: Yes, that was when they attacked Columbus. I was visiting some relatives and I stayed about six months. The day before Villa attacked Columbus, I returned to the Valle San Buena Ventura. We arrived and found out that Villa had burned

and shot and destroyed everything. One of the first houses they burned was my uncle's home where I had been staying. In front of my uncle's home there was a park where there was a fort of American soldiers. My uncle found out from some friends, one was a Villista, that Villa was going to attack that night, and he tried to warn the soldiers, but they did not believe him. The Villistas then entered and burned homes, stores, hotels and everything. They destroyed the town, just about.

F: Were these people rich?

D: My uncle?

F: Yes.

D: Well, I believe they did have a position. I don't know how rich they were, but he had the rancho or hacienda. I don't know what it was, Las Palomas, and he had a lot of cattle. My uncle was bringing a lot of cattle, horses and other things, to the United States because Villa was around. But they did not believe my uncle's warning and that night many people died.

F: You mentioned your uncle was a good friend with General Pershing.

D: Yes, he was a good friend with General Pershing, also with some others that I cannot remember right now; but Pershing is the one I remember the most. My uncle and him would see each other daily at the drugstore and I would go with my uncle every day. I would get excited because Pershing would

adore me because I was young. Every day my uncle would buy me a banana split, and Pershing would give me a bottle of caramels, which were expensive, so I got to know Pershing well. Then when Villa attacked, Pershing followed him to the Valle San Buena Vertura where I was. When the soldiers arrived and I was watching them, and I saw Pershing and I yelled and he called to me, "Adios, María." And that's what I remember about when Pershing was after Villa, and about Villa; but they did not catch him. It was a good thing that they ran away, because they were going to take some women, and the first one on the list was my mother because she was real pretty. We lived across from the house they took over and used as a fort, so we could see what went on. My mother was not taken by the Villistas, but one of my cousins who lived on the corner was not so lucky.

F: How did you know about that list?

D: We had been out playing in the street when we heard shooting and our parents told us to get in the house. They would bang on the doors with their rifles. My mother finally opened [it] and it was Pershing. I think he had a Mexican colonel with him, I'm not sure what he was. They talked with my parents. My mother offered them water and bread. They said they were hungry so my mother offered to make them something to eat. They bought a lot of meat which my mother hurriedly cooked on our wood stove; they were really hungry. My mother said she was willing to do what she could for them.

Since they saw that we were not against them and that there were no Villistas among us, they posted guards around our house so no one would try to harm us. During the days they were in the valley we were protected by them.

F: Were they protecting you because your mother had been nice to them?

D: I guess so. The captain who was in charge was very grateful to my mother for everything she did for them. My mother had some fresh chorizo and the soldiers would eat it even without cooking.

F: Did you go to Juarez from Valle San Buena Ventura?

D: No, we went to Chihuahua as I told you before. Then we went to Juarez because as I told you the Villistas were after my father. From there we went to El Paso. My father had a little money but he got a job at the depot and things got better.

F: Can you tell me what you remember about the Spanish Flu of 1918?

D: Yes; I remember it was terrible. There were many deaths. As time went by even the doctors wouldn't go to the homes, they would just send medicine. I would see the people loaded on the wagons, like trash, when they were dead. The disease was so contagious! My brother was sick and I would take care of him. He would cough up blood and bleed through his nose, too. I did not get sick. My mother and father got

sick but the doctor was a good friend so he took good care of them. They were in bed a few days and I had to take care of them. But I did not get sick.

F: Can you tell me what you remember about World War I?

D: That was in 1917. No, I really can't remember, only that we thought my father would have to go to war, but he didn't. During the Depression I was already married. I had three children. It was a very hard time. My husband had a butcher shop in his mother's store but his mother would extend too much credit and finally they had to close down the store. People had to use coupons to buy food because everything was rationed. Some things like coffee, sugar and rice could not be bought. You could buy one pair of shoes per year, I think.

F: Did your husband find a job?

D: He had a difficult time because he had always worked in the family. They had had a dairy before the store. He worked at Price's Dairy for a while but jobs were very scarce. He would work for fifty cents a day. Then he worked at the rock quarry near Smelter. He walked from our house on San Antonio Street to and from work. With the fifty cents he made, he would tell me to buy what we needed. Our stove used wood so I would buy 25¢ of wood plus some beans. Every day I would buy something we needed.

F: So you really had a hard time?

D: Yes, we suffered a lot. Then when the Public Works Act started, my husband got a job there. He made \$16.75 every two weeks. Then we decided to buy a house. Our payment was \$7.50 per month, although he would give \$10.00 a month. It was a nicer house and he would fix it up and he added rooms to it.

F: How about Prohibition of the 1920s?

D: Yes. About liquor. I remember this was a dry state. You could not buy liquor here, but there was a lot of contraband. They would bring it across the river in cans. The bootleggers would then take it to certain houses to sell it. They were taking a chance but that's how they made their living.

F: You say you would hear a lot of shots fired?

D: Yes. We were living on San Antonio by San Xavier Church. Some bootleggers lived close to us and there was only a fence dividing our houses. The river was nearby, many times the federales would stop or try to stop the bootleggers from bringing the liquor across. That's what I remember about Prohibition.

F: What political party do you belong to?

D: I am a Democrat.

F: Why are you a Democrat?

D: I think the Democrats are more for the poor people. And since I am poor, I am a Democrat. With the exception that I voted for Nixon who was a Republican, although later on I regretted it.

F: Do you always vote?

D: Yes, except for last year because I was in the hospital.

F: Did you come to El Paso because Villa was going to attack Juarez?

D: No, he was going to attack Chihuahua and they were going to shoot my father.

F: What were your first impressions about El Paso?

D: Of El Paso my first impressions were that life was very different than in Chihuahua. I liked it. We went to the movies for 5¢, the trolley car cost 5¢, and we could get ice cream for 5¢ also. Sometimes we got a quarter so we would see two movies.

F: Did you have problems adjusting to life here?

D: Yes we did, because our lives were very distinct. In Chihuahua we were well off. When we first came to El Paso we were living in two rooms. Our house in Chihuahua was very big and we had maids and a boy to run errands. They would do everything. We were not used to seeing poor people. When we first came, we saw a poor family and when I went to their house I was very stunned. The lady was crying because she didn't have food for her kids. I went home and told my mother and she gave me some food for them. I had some problems in school since I did not know English, but I liked school. I was in St. Ignacio, Aoy, Corazon de Jesus, and Burleson; we would move far from one school to another.

F: Did you ever feel you were discriminated against?

D: No, gracias a Dios, but I have seen and still see it towards other people; but never against my family.

F: When did you become a citizen?

D: I don't remember, I believe in 1952 - '53.

F: Did you have any problems?

D: No, I would have become a citizen sooner because the classes were held at Santo Angel. When we moved to Hacienda Heights, I finally did. I didn't have any problems. They asked me nine questions and I wanted to know if that was all.

F: What do you think about the word Chicano?

D: I really can't say. I read in the paper about Chicanos.

F: How about the word itself?

D: I don't know much, but when I hear the word Chicano I feel it is offensive. I don't know who designated them by that name--Chicano.

F: What do you think about illegal aliens?

D: I know there are a lot of them here. I don't think it is right. Those of us who have become citizens did it to have more rights and protection.

F: Do you think it is right for them to come here and work?

D: Well, I think they help on the farms and the people who have housemaids. There are many problems with employers who hire illegal aliens. Many people from here won't work for what they will.

F: Mrs. de la O is now going to give me her impressions of Francisco Villa as a person.

D: When I was young Pancho Villa lived in Chihuahua with his wife, Luz. They had a very elegant house and he had a car with a chauffeur. When I saw him in Columbus, New Mexico and then in the valle he looked very different. He had always dressed very elegant. In the valley he was wearing levis, a blue shirt and a handkerchief around his neck and a huge hat. He was all dirty, so different from what I had seen before.

F: You say he lived in a real big house?

D: Yes. Now they made it into a museum, but I don't think that's the house I knew.

F: Was he rich?

D: No; he had money from his pay I guess. When I saw him in the valley he was very cruel. He would kill people just to kill. We lived in front of the consulate and he made it into a fort. He was very cruel.

F: In what way?

D: He would kill people. He would go to a house and kill for no reason at all. He would cut off people's ears. At a dance they took a bunch of boys to fight with them. My cousin was one of them. That's when my mother met Villa. She went with my aunt to see if they would let my cousin stay home. He said no.

F: They would just take them?

D: Yes. My cousin says Villa would kneel and pray to the Virgen de Guadalupe before every battle. He had a tatoo

of the Virgen on his chest. My cousin finally escaped and he made it home safely. Many of the boys he would take didn't even know how to use a gun.

F: Thank you very much.