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Spring 2010

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**Eloy Z. Gonzalez Oral History**

By

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Spring 2010

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Porcion & Oral History Project  
University of Texas Pan American  
Community Historical Archaeology Program for the  
Schools (CHAPS)

The Rio Grande Valley has a rich history yet little documentation on our past and until recently, relatively little effort has been made in order to preserve that history. Through student oriented research we can hope to capture moments of existence through people's perspectives of their own experiences as well as their perspectives of the experiences that have been shared with them. The goal of my involvement with the Community Historical Archaeology Program for the Schools (CHAPS) is to attempt to utilize ethnographic techniques in documenting Oral Histories of local Rio Grande Valley residents and by doing so, contribute to the reconstruction, through such reflections of the past, of an understanding of the specific cultural, social, political, and economic factors that have changed and created the unique "Borderlands" in which we live. Mr. Eloy Z. Gonzalez is the perfect candidate for an Ethnographic informant because of the multitude of significant and meaningful experiences he has experienced and been informed about in life, and his eagerness to share those experiences and his firsthand knowledge with others. Although as an interview group we facilitated the conversation with Eloy using an outline we did not follow it strictly and the dialogue grew easily and on its own with Eloy often adding in extra details, elaborating, and leading into separate conversations of interest. Many of the things described concern his personal past history however these human aspects of Ethnography are the factors that set a context for history to occur within.

He was born on January 30<sup>th</sup> of 1947 and grew up in the same town, Edcouch TX. Most of the Interview is concerned with, or the context of the stories usually takes place in, Edcouch or the adjoining city Elsa. However certain aspects of his family history and later career history take us to different locations within and outside of the Rio Grande Valley reinforcing the idea that the social environment is constantly changing in the Rio Grande Valley due to both internal and external stimuli. He had four siblings, three sisters (two older), one older brother, and one

younger brother many of which, excluding his younger brother, but including himself, were delivered in Edcouch, at home by a midwife as many other south Texas families chose to deliver their young. As a child he spent much time with his grandparents, who were advanced in age by the time he remembers them, and this was a result of his grandmother being a housewife, his grandfather being retired, and the close proximity of their home from his in Edcouch. He discussed briefly his family history in which his parents moved to Goliad due to economic reasons years before Eloy was born when they returned to the Rio Grande Valley. He describes how many of his family members, specifically on his father's side of relation, lived nearby in Edcouch/Elsa and about the interactions and relationships that he created and witnessed. When he first went to school it was what they called a "beginner" school called Edcouch Elementary for children who speak Spanish, and after second grade they would move to central Elementary where they spoke English in the classrooms, where he later attended. He discussed how the schools in Edcouch were segregated in the 1950's, all of the Mexican, Spanish speaking children would go to Edcouch Elementary, and the Anglo, English speaking children went to Central until you learned English. Central was located between Edcouch and Elsa and children from both cities attended it. Central is now called John F. Kennedy Elementary. He discusses how most of the people in Edcouch were Roman Catholic and if they weren't they were Methodists. He also tells of how on Halloween, he and all of his friends who lived in the Mexican part of town would go to the White neighborhoods because they were quite generous with candy. He elaborates on the types of food they would receive and how it would last them days. He talks about how his neighborhood had no sewage yet the sewage pipes that supply plumbing to the wealthier people ran straight through their neighborhood. Because of this the people in these neighborhoods used

outhouses, and it being Halloween Eloy tells us of how the older kids picked up an outhouse and placed it on top of the school building as a practical joke.

Other notable information gathered from this dialogue with Eloy includes his discussion on Entertainment in the Rio Grande Valley and the many places that existed that are not around today including movie theatres, drive-in movie theatres, Delta Lake, dance halls, and swimming pools. He talks about seeing the premier of Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender" with his older sister who was in high school at the time at the Sky View Drive-in theatre and about how it was loud because "all the girls were screaming". He also talks about stories and facts about Valley history that he was told by his parents, grandparents, and other elders. He was told about how this land was settled through cattle ranching and farming, and about how they would pay people per acre to clear fields for agricultural use. He also talked about how in the past there weren't that many people in the Rio Grande Valley and people often married into their own families. He mentions how his great-grandparents were first cousins and recalls his great-grandfather Ramiro Gonzalez telling him that "you know, now there's more people around here, there's no need" to marry inside the family. He talks about the Bracero Program and the influx of Mexican migrant laborers during WWII. Another highlight of his discussion was when he talked about Bobby Lackey and how Donna won the first, and only, State High School Football Championship for a school from the Rio Grande Valley.

Not only do the life experiences as told by Eloy Z. Gonzalez depict life as it may have existed during his lifetime, but so do the accounts of Eloy's ancestral heritage. Eloy connects much of his ancestral heritage to the beginning founders of Mier, the Gonzalez family. Beginning with Nicholas Gonzalez and continuing up unto his great grandfather, Ramiro Gonzalez, there is said to have been a lot of intermarriage practiced to keep the families in

solidarity with one another. But up into Eloy's childhood, intermarriage was discouraged and marrying in the family line was frowned upon. Another significant ancestor of Eloy that took part in the reconnaissance of settlements in the New World was Jose de Arrutia who integrated with the Indians and became their chief for approximately 7 years. Arrutia led the Indians into fights with the Apaches and soon after became a chief of a *presidio* in San Antonio. Eloy's lineage is connected to Jose de Arrutia through his mother whose ancestor is Jose Macario Sombrano. Eloy's connection of ancestral heritage also connected him with that of his father's who was related to Diego Gonzalez. Diego Gonzalez was a wealthy direct ancestor and sharecropper who had dealings with his maternal ancestor, Jose de Arrutia.

With much curiosity we were also able to obtain historical accounts from Eloy of the Texas Rangers and their notorious killings. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there existed ongoing quarrels between the Texas Rangers and Mexicans. Eloy mentions a shocking account heard from his co-worker, Robert Puckett, of a group of Mexican male individuals who were detained and killed by the Texas Rangers for allegedly killing a Texas Ranger. The story of the Texas Rangers was definitely two sided but brought into question about what had actually happened. A.Y. Baker was said to be one of the main contributors to the violence and killings instigated towards the Mexicans. Interaction between the Texas Rangers and Mexicans resulted in a distorted view of social relationships in the Rio Grande Valley.

The career history of Eloy Z. Gonzalez represents the economic window of opportunities and sacrifices that he experienced during his adulthood. Eloy abandoned school at the University of Texas at Pan American and became a part of the National Guard with the help from family members. He then succeeded in many job benefits and openings in response to joining the Texas Employment Commission. Eloy participated as a hospital assistant wheeling

patients and moving furniture but was later economically disrupted and demanded by the National Guard to fulfill basic training. Eloy experienced a sequence of ups and downs throughout his economic career but was usually offered a job opportunity in the outcome. He maintained a job in Austin and latterly worked for the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington D.C. where he lived with his sister, her husband, and subsequently a co-worker. During the time Eloy was in Washington, he was faced with many climatic events; the birth of his new daughter, the assassination of President Ronald Reagan and the return to his homeland where he retired from his last job as a TEC office employer in Weslaco.

Growing up in the Rio Grande Valley, even though we may have had different experiences, enables us to sympathize with the perspectives of people who also grew up in a similar culture, in the same area, and with people who's history involves familiar landmarks. We can see through the examples of: The Bracero Program, The history of The Texas Rangers, the segregation of schools, the premier of Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender" at the Sky View Theatre, Donna's State High School Football Championship, the environmental factors (drought) leading to the loss of work and his family moving to Goliad before he was born, his entrance into the national guard, and many other socially, politically, culturally, and economically significant events that effected Eloy, a handful of the many circumstances that have changed specific aspects of our culture and identity as residents of the Rio Grande Valley "Borderlands".