

INTERVIEWEE: OSCAR M. LAUREL (Tape #1)

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. McCOMB

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M: First of all, I'd like to know something about your background.

Where were you born and when?

L: Well, I was born in Laredo, Texas--Webb County, Texas, on June 8, 1920.

I was born of parents that were American citizens, but their descendants--their parents had come originally from Mexico, the Northern part of Mexico--an old city close by to Zapata, Texas, known as Guerrero Tamaulipas, Mexico. And my parents came over, I guess, the latter part of the 1880's. They settled on my mother's side in the county of Zapata, and on my father's side in the county of Webb. They were ranching people, people that made their living off of the grazing lands that were prevalent then and are still prevalent now in that part of the state. I went to school in Laredo, Texas. I really got started in elementary schools at Ursuline Academy there in Laredo. The Ursuline Sisters used to have their convent close by to where the present United States border station at Laredo is. So my first school years really were under the Catholic Sisters, the Ursuline Sisters. I have happy memories of those years, although those were difficult years. It was around 1932-1933. My interest in politics was opened up a little bit, even as young as I was.

M: Why was that?

L: Mostly on account of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I think he has done much for many people, but mostly I believe for the Mexican-American--in this respect, that when we have a period of economic decay, a period

of economic hardship, it seems that the Mexican-American is the first to feel it.

M: Why is this?

L: I would say because of their lack of educational preparation; their lack of opportunities for learning skills that bring better pay that is not prevalent in many other people.

M: If there is economic hard times, are the Latins the first to be laid off?

L: I would say so because they're in the fringes, really, of the economic employment force. They're the least prepared really to hold on to any kind of a job that has decent wages. So I got to see a lot of my friends, for example, join the Tree Army--they used to call it the CCC.

M: They called it Tree Army because of what?

L: Because it had its aspect of conserving--

M: Planting trees?

L: Well, planting trees, going to the depleted forests, protecting the natural resources of our country, and yet being able to give some of our kids an opportunity to work and to prepare themselves maybe after they've served in the Tree Army, to come back and continue their education. We're talking now about people that were laid off of work, entire families, and this accorded them an opportunity not only to see that the natural resources be protected, but they also get a tremendous economic uplift.

M: Was there any difficulty in Latins being taken into the CCC? Were they taken in on an equal basis with everyone else?

L: I'm not aware of any particular problem along those lines. You see,

Laredo is unique in many ways. I would say that the population of Laredo is currently about 70-percent of Mexican extraction or Mexican descent, whatever phrase you want to use. And we were never aware of any particular discrimination insofar as people belonging to different religions or belonging to different nationalities. Being raised in the same kind of friendly atmosphere were people of the Jewish faith, people that their fathers used to come from the Middle East, particularly from the Arab countries, and of course very few black Americans, as I remember, so we had no problem then. I'm not aware of any of our young people, really, having any difficulty in joining the Army. So it comes to mind now, of course, that the PWA works of course--quite a few historical buildings were rebuilt and preserved under the Roosevelt Administration, again giving some of our people who understood about the different craftsmanship that it takes to build houses or build museums or whatever the case may be, bricklayers, carpenters, and so on--these people were given a job. These things I still remember.

M: Then it's at this point with the federal government programs that you became aware of politics?

L: Very definitely. Although I must go back really. The very first time that I remember of any particular national election it was the Alfred Smith and Herbert Hoover, and as I recall now, it was in 1927. I was only seven then. But somehow it was important to us or maybe some of our people talked about it so much because we were always raised under the Catholic faith. And I would say a preponderant majority of the Mexican-Americans, of American citizens of Mexican descent, are traditionally Catholics. And Alfred Smith--or Governor

Smith--being the first of our faith really to become a Democratic nominee for the Presidency was something that created a tremendous amount of interest in our area. But, of course, we know now that he lost the election, but my interest stems really from that particular election, and for that reason. Then, of course, the Roosevelt years I remember vividly. I remember them because I think it was a period when we were growing up; a period of depression, recessions and so many other things.

M: Did your parents have a hard time during the depression?

L: They did. Of course, everybody was having hard times then. My father was a rancher--we called them rancheros, as differentiated from farming, although he did a little farming. But something happened during those years. I think he lost heavily in raising cattle, and he gave that up. Then he got into growing cotton. And during those years the fellow who would own the land, would actually have a fellow look after it, and the fellow who tended and tilled the soil and so on and planted the cotton would get one-fourth of the proceeds. The owner, of course, of the land getting three-fourths. Under different arrangements and circumstances, they would go on halves. In Spanish we used to call them quarteros, which means one-fourth of the proceeds to the fellow who would tend the land, and medieros under those circumstances where the fellow who was looking after the land and tilling it and planting it and harvesting it would get one-half of the proceeds. So these were the formative years, I believe, and to this day I think my interest in politics as I grew up identified itself more with the Democratic Party, its philosophy, what it really stands for, and the participation of the Mexican-Americans

through the years have been more active, and I think that this is the way it should be. I think we ought to be faithful to the party that has given us the opportunity that we would not otherwise have had under any other Administration or under the banner of any other party.

M: Let's carry this a little bit further. Where did you get your college education?

L: Well, my college education, I have to--. I graduated first of all from high school in Laredo. I was late in graduating. You see, I used to live with an uncle of mine who never married, and I used to live in Oilton, a little community thirty-four miles east of Laredo. It's a little farming and ranching community, and I used to live with my uncle when I was growing up--I used to go to the ranch with him all the time. And in the process I was missing out on school. I was really playing "hooky" and not realizing what a tremendous injury I was doing to my educational opportunities. Well, at any rate, I graduated from high school in Laredo, and I got my daddy to send me to college. I wanted to go to college. As it turns out, out of a family of seven, the Laurel family--my family, four boys and three girls--I'm the only graduate from a college with any kind of a degree. And I think it has been that particular persistence, really, on my part that paid off because I was twenty before I was able to go to college. And I went to Loyola University of the South with the Jesuit Fathers in New Orleans. And I attended one year, that was '40-'41. I came back during the summer of '41 and decided to volunteer in the Air Force in September of 1941.

This was a time when the war clouds were gathering and boiling all

over Europe. I kind of had an idea that this was the time for us to really be concerned with the coming problems, with the rise of Hitlerism and Fascism as represented by Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany. And I joined. I still remember September 12, 1941, going to San Antonio, 150 miles north of Laredo, to volunteer. I had to take a test really to join the Air Force. They told me then--and hopefully, I kind of feel that they were telling me the truth--that I did pass the test; but at any rate, I did join the Air Force, took my basic training in San Antonio; I was sent to Wichita Falls--Shepherd Field as I remember--and then on to Amarillo, Texas--Amarillo Air Force Base, where I turned out to be a teacher of mechanics, an aircrafts mechanics instructor.

Now, prior to my joining the Air Force, I never knew anything about mechanics. So it just goes to show you that with a little training, a little opportunity to learn, a man can bring himself to really do a lot of things that he didn't think possible under normal circumstances.

I never got to serve overseas really. The main reason for it was my teaching responsibilities, although I did volunteer for overseas duty. I had specialized training on Boeing B-17's and on the then very "hush-hush" kind of a project, the B-29's. I took special training in Seattle Boeing School, and I was about to go overseas when VJ Day came around. As I recall, it was August 15, 1945. So I never got to serve overseas.

I was released from the Air Force with an honorable discharge on December 7, 1945, on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. After that, I picked up my schooling again under the G.I. Bill of Rights. This is,

by the way, one of the things that really caused a lot of our young people from Laredo and all over South Texas to avail themselves of an opportunity that they would not otherwise have had--under the G.I. Bill of Rights to continue your education. I went to the University until about '49. In the meantime, I lost my daddy.

M: Is this the University of Texas?

L: University of Texas. I took my prelaw training there. After my daddy had died, I had to drop out for a little while and after about six months, I picked up my--I decided rather to study law and went to South Texas College of Law in Houston and graduated with an LL.B. in 1950. I took my bar examination almost the same month that I graduated from South Texas College of Law, and I was advised on September 15, as I remember, of 1950 that I had successfully completed or passed the bar examination. Afterwards, of course, I was in private practice as a lawyer.

M: Was this in Houston?

L: No, I went back to Laredo. In 1951 I was married to a very pretty lady, and we have two children now.

M: What are their names?

L: Their names are Elsa Irma--she's sixteen now, and my son Oscar, Jr.--he's fourteen. My wife's name is Elsa. We are very happy and the children are happy. But we'll go into maybe some of their activities when we get to up-date our interview here.

M: You're now a lawyer in Laredo?

L: In Laredo, right.

M: In the early 1950's.

L: In the early 1950's. In 1952 I was offered an opportunity for my first

public service. I was offered an opportunity to serve as Special Investigator to the District Attorney in Laredo. I served in that capacity until 1955 or '56. But in 1955 I decided to run for national president of LULAC--the League of United Latin American Citizens, an organization founded on February 17, 1929, right before the depression as we know it, or at least before this black Friday that we know of in October of 1929. But this organization is unique in this respect--for once, we had one organization really emerging to represent or to articulate the needs, the desires, and the aspirations of American citizens of Mexican descent. This organization was born in Corpus Christi, Texas.

M: Did you know any of the founders?

L: The founders? There are many people--I hate to name some and leave out some, but there are many people from all over South Texas because therein lies the biggest concentration of Mexican-Americans in Texas, and they got together for this particular purpose. They wanted to encourage our young people really in furthering their education, to be good Americans above all; to be proud of the fact of their own ethnic and cultural background, but by no means overlook the fact that if we are to become good Americans, that we must discharge our responsibility as citizens. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to serve. I was elected and served one year as national president.

M: Had you worked a great extent with LULAC before this?

L: Yes, I've been working with LULAC for many years really prior to this time.

M: What was the nature of your work?

L: The nature of the work really was to be involved with the local council,

the Laredo LULAC Council #12 and serving in different capacities as a local official of the organization; we have had about four national presidents of the organization come from Laredo. And I got to serve under some of their administrations in different capacities--legal counsel, executive secretary, and secretary, and so many other positions. So prior to my assuming the national presidency, I had already served in different capacities on the national organization. But it presented me with a great opportunity to travel and become sufficiently aware and cognizant of the problems affecting so many of our own Mexican-Americans in other parts of South Texas and other parts of the Southwestern part of the United States.

M: What is the geographic extent of the LULAC organization?

L: Well, it really got started in Texas. It branched out into New Mexico, into Arizona, into Colorado, into California. First, the Southwest. During the years of Mr. Felix Tijerina, who was the national president in 1956, '57, and '58, as I remember--a very wonderful gentleman from Houston, a restaurant owner, a man that really had no formal schooling or education--

M: Is he the owner of the Felix Restaurants?

L: The owner of the Felix Restaurants of Houston, a man who started as a bus boy, by the way, a man who started serving on tables and just by dint of a lot of hard work and knowledge of the business, he was able to reach the heights really. I'm sorry to say that he died a few years ago, but by then he had pushed forward one of his great dreams, that of making available for our young children--the children of the people that really never got around to learning any English--

American citizens, mind you, by creating what they call now the School of the Four Hundred. And that was the actual learning of four hundred words of young kids prior to getting into school, learning at least enough words where they could communicate with their own teacher and with kids their own age.

M: It would be English words you're talking about?

L: English words, that's right.

M: So the School of the Four Hundred was a pre-school to teach Latin children English--Latin Americans, Americans of Mexican descent.

L: That's right. Of Mexican descent, that's right.

M: English before they got to school?

L: That's right.

M: This would be sort of like a Headstart program?

L: You know that was the forerunner of the Headstart.

M: Is there a connection between that and Headstart?

L: I'm sure there must be. You know, Headstart is really one of the outstanding innovations and projects under the OEO, but I believe that the success of the School of the Four Hundred really in Texas--and by the way it was adopted by the Texas legislature. I haven't told you about some of our other offices that we've been honored to serve in. But it was so successful in Texas that it was adopted--it was about to be adopted in some other states.

M: This was sponsored by LULAC?

L: By LULAC.

M: And started with Felix Tijerina?

L: With Mr. Tijerina, that's right. He was the man who really made it a success. To prove to other people that this thing could work, he

started it strictly as a personal project of LULAC.

M: Whereabouts did it start, do you remember?

L: I think it was the Baytown area in Texas, that's south of Houston--southeast of Houston. What do they call it? The Gulf Coast? The Gulf Coast area of Texas. It got started as a pilot program that had tremendous success, and it was later adopted by the Legislature of the State of Texas because this really got so big that no one man or one organization really could bring it about. It meant of course, special training because these kids had to have this training prior to getting into their formal education on their six grades, so there was pre-school training really is what it amounted to.

M: How did the mechanics of this work? Did LULAC send out teachers, or did they try to handle this through local offices or what?

L: What they did really is--Mr. Tijerina, as I recall, created a foundation or a special organization. And he had the help and cooperation of a lot of the great citizens of Houston and all over the state. And they had a pilot program, as I remember, in Baytown--the Baytown area and the area south of Houston. I forget now the exact locality, but it was through the funds that some of the friends of LULAC and some of the leaders that were able to generate this financial support that this thing got started.

M: Did the children go to a special school class for this?

L: Right, with a special teacher. Someone, in other words, that had enough background or affinity with Spanish so that he or she, as the case may be--. As I remember, it was a young lady that really conducted this pilot class in a little community south of Houston, the exact name of which escapes me at the moment. But she had not only

the interest, but the desire really, to communicate with young children whose only language really was Spanish, because that was the only language that their parents knew and that could communicate with their own children. So it was in teaching these basic four hundred words, I think, that came about to this preschool projects in Texas. And now we see them all over the country--

M: So, you can say that this LULAC program was a success?

L: It was a success, and I still would like to say it is a forerunner now of the Headstart program that has been one of the outstanding successes of OEO, the Office of Economic Opportunity, under President Johnson's Administration, very definitely.

M: Did LULAC get into the political campaigns?

L: LULAC from the very beginning really set out a constitution that barred any kind of political activity or participation as an organization, but that did not preclude its leaders from being personally involved in political participation and participating in elections and campaigns and so on.

M: Then LULAC would not endorse a candidate?

L: No.

M: But the leader might?

L: Right.

M: On his own personally.

L: Right. Very definitely. Because I think that some of the leaders that have come up within the organization were very much aware of some of our own problems. They, of course, had an opportunity to meet with a lot of its membership throughout the Southwestern part of the United States; they were very much aware of some of the needs

of our people, particularly in the field of medical care, housing, equal opportunity for jobs; and really of encouraging our people to continue their education, that if for some reason, and I imagine the main reason for it being the lack of economic opportunity for better jobs, if their parents were unable to really go to college, to really encourage the kids to continue their education on a higher level. So this was a very gratifying experience for me, the LULAC involvement, and to this day I'm still active in it in some form or another.

M: You say they encouraged the children to go on. How would they do this?

L: In many ways. They would establish an annual project to raise funds to grant scholarships, for example. They would encourage local school authorities to give a little more attention to the special and peculiar needs of some of our young children that had some sense of inferiority for lack of--or inability rather of communicating with their counterparts and with other young kids. And all of these things, of course, were able to impress the local school boards, first of all, that equality of opportunity should begin in school where these kids would be given the opportunity to excell insofar as their talents and their ability would permit them to do so and that no discriminatory practices would be allowed or tolerated, and every time that this was proven, even some suits were brought in the name of the school children that were involved in different parts of the State of Texas and different parts of the United States really--the Southwestern part.

M: So LULAC would take legal action for--

L: Very definitely. Of course, you've got to keep in mind that a lot of

young and able lawyers were donating their time in bringing about and enjoining school boards from having the young Mexican-American students discriminated [against].

M: And you were in on some of this kind of work?

L: We were in only from the standpoint of encouraging those who at that time, as I remember, were in position to do so. Able attorneys like Gus Garcia originally from Laredo, later on from San Antonio, and many other outstanding attorneys who donated their time and their talents and their ability to have a new sense of equality for our school children. These were, of course, the years of the 1950's--the early '50's--when some of these cases were being fought, and were being won, by the way. So I believe that much has happened, much has been done. To be sure, a lot remains to be done, but we have come a long way.

M: Did LULAC try to work with any of the national or federal programs such as those during the depression? Was there any connection between the organization and the federal government at that time?

L: I'm not aware of any, at least not during the depression.

M: Let me ask you this then. Does LULAC operate primarily on a local basis, or is it interested in national programs--

L: No, LULAC is a national organization. It is located in midwestern states now; it is located in the eastern part of the United States, so it is truly a national organization. And a national organization itself is concerned with national problems as they affect the economic and the job opportunity and the educational and medical welfare of our own ethnic group.

M: But LULAC reaches all the way down to the local level?

- L: Very definitely, because we have local councils. We have local councils belonging to a district, and a district can actually become a part of several counties or cities. And then we have a regional office that is now the geographic boundaries of a state.
- M: Is it fair to compare, or say that they are similar, LULAC and the NAACP or B'nai B'rith? Are those organizations comparable in what they aim to do?
- L: I imagine that they are comparable, and I think that in talking about some of our own organizations, I ought to mention the GI Forum that came about after the war. It was created again in Corpus Christi. Its founder is Dr. Hector Garcia, a very fine gentleman and a very great leader of the Mexican-Americans and their fight for equal opportunity and recognition. Yes, I think, that there is a common goal or objective in these organizations--B'nai B'rith, NAACP, LULAC, GI Forum, and so many other organizations that I'm sure that we haven't even mentioned that exist in the Western part of the United States, having as their prime interest now the protection of the equal opportunity for better jobs and better housing and better educational opportunities of American citizens of Mexican descent.
- M: Now, I'd like to shift a little bit and tie this in with political interests.
- L: Right. You know, I didn't run for reelection for national president of LULAC because again, the constitution barred us from having a national office in LULAC and a political office, where you have to run for public office. So I didn't run for reelection, and what I had decided then was to run for the Texas legislature. That was in the 80th legislative district comprised of Webb and Zapata counties.

So in 1956, I ran for the Texas legislature and I was successful and represented both counties--

M: Now, this is the House?

L: The House of Representatives in Texas, yes. And I represented both counties hopefully in a manner that reflected well on both counties for two terms. So actually I served during the session of 1957 and the session of 1959. Those were important years in the Texas legislature.

M: You say they're important years. Would you explain that?

L: Well, important years I believe because--I remember in 1957 or '59, I'm not aware now. But it was in October of '57, I remember, when Sputnik was actually thrown into the skies by the Russians and that we first realized that American superiority of almost everything that we can think of was just a myth; that really we were not number one any more, certainly not in space technology. And then we began to look around and we noted also that again, maybe we're not number one in many other respects. At any rate, they were difficult years for another reason. I think it was in 1959 when Texas, and I'm sure we're still having it, was having financial problems--revenue raising problems where we are all of a sudden aware of a great dynamic state, rich in mineral resources, but still unable to pay their teachers a decent salary; still unable to give the highest educational opportunities to all of its citizens, or at least the best that is available. Then I think the big fight over the sales tax, as I remember. These were the years when there was some disillusionment. And I think it was good for this reason, I think that Texas for all of its richness, for all of its greatness, I think had to realize that

if we are to have good teachers, we've got to pay them well. And I think since then, I'm sure that we're doing much better for them.

As I recall, in 1959, the starting salary of a teacher was only about \$3,800 or \$3,900. I think during that session we raised it up to \$4,200 maybe. Of course, things have changed since then. But then I enjoyed serving in the legislature.

M: Did you consider yourself a liberal at that time?

L: Yes, I would consider myself a liberal.

M: Did you follow the leadership of Mrs. Randolph during that period?

L: No, not much. I know that I was very much aware of Mrs. Randolph. I used to read the Texas Observer very often, and I knew about some of the ideas of the liberals. I worked well with labor in some instances; in other instances, I did not. Although I consider myself a liberal, I'm certainly not one whom you would call a dyed-in-the-wool liberal. I think in a lot of respects I had to be that way. While we as members of the state legislature, we would look after the welfare of the state as a whole, we've still got to keep in mind the needs of our own special district, the special needs of our own district. Our own district in Webb and Zapata Counties is a very poor one--one with a chronic unemployment, of low salaries. Lot of people that went into the migrant stream looking for better jobs every year up north--all of these things we were very much aware of. And these were the years that I believe in my own estimation that gave me a better understanding of the overall problems of this state.

M: So you as a legislator worked for your own community and based your position on political issues in regard to that?

L: I think I had to really, because there were not too many of Mexican descent

in the state legislature then. I remember a young man from El Paso very distinctly who was as liberal in his application or in his voting record as I was, a young fellow by the name of Mauro Rosas from El Paso. I also remember fondly, and even to this day I retain his friendship, Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez of San Antonio, a great leader, a man whose political career I have followed since the early '50's when he was elected to the city council of San Antonio. And when he decided to run for the Senate, everyone thought that it was an impossible dream, as the song puts it now. But this impossible dream became very much of a reality. And since then, I believe, has been one of the outstanding leaders of Americans of Mexican descent, really and truly a man of national stature, a man that I have a lot of admiration and respect for.

I served of course with a man who is my Congressman now, Abraham (Chic) Kazen, Jr. We were raised together in Laredo; he's also from Laredo, a man of unique abilities and concern for our people in our area. Although his parents were immigrants to this country--they were Lebanese--in a lot of ways our identification, our concern, our desire to improve the opportunities of our own ethnic groups has paralleled one with the other, although we come from different nationalities or different ethnic groups. But he has done well by our people and I'm glad to call him a friend.

M: In the Texas legislature, were you ever hindered by prejudice?

L: You know, I never really--oh, maybe if I was I've forgotten about it, but then if I've forgotten about it, it's certainly because I wasn't hindered to an extent to where it made an impact on me. I used to get along and still do even to this day with people who were

diametrically opposed to my own beliefs on the segregation question, for example. Some of our people from East Texas, for example--they were representing the wishes and the desires of their own constituency, and very different from mine. I used to get along with them socially; we never got to a point where we lost respect for each other. I don't know that I agreed with their philosophy. I just know that eventually we had to do away with segregation, whether it is segregating Americans of Mexican descent or whether they are black Americans or Jewish-Americans, or whatever the hyphenated American may be. I think that if we are to achieve the greatness that Texas and the rest of the nation is deserving of, I think we ought to do away with those theories and ideas.

M: Have you ever reflected on the causes of prejudice?

L: I think it's a matter of atmosphere or environment. In Spanish, we call it Ambiente. Ambiente means just like saying ambient air, you know, the thing that is around you. I think that is important. I think that if a man is raised under circumstances where their parents are either consciously or unconsciously making any difference about their neighbors, they are actually planting a seed of distrust or mistrust in the minds of a young child. Certainly, ideas can be influenced by their parents. And I think as they are nurtured and grow up, these ideas just come to the fore from time to time. Again, I think that that's the blessing of having been born and raised in a city like Laredo.

M: Then how do you go about breaking down prejudice?

L: I think through education. I'll tell you this. Of course, it was a calamity; it was something that I wouldn't like to see again

happen--the world war, I think, tore down the barriers of this mistrust and misunderstanding of the different people from different ethnic groups and different national backgrounds. I think as we traveled from one part of the country to the other, we got to serve with black Americans, Polish Americans, Jewish Americans, and I got the feeling that they were no different than I was. And I sure hope that they feel now that I was no different than they were. I believe that the world war was the beginning of the tearing down of these tremendous walls of prejudice that had been built up through years of misunderstanding and distrust among the different groups that populate and have made America a unique place in which everyone should have an equal opportunity, commensurate with his own talents and ability; that he can go as high as the next man, if he can work as hard and apply himself and learn as good as the next one.

M: Do you think the various laws stressing civil rights that have been passed in recent years are helpful in breaking down prejudice?

L: I think they're helpful with regard to letting people know that regardless of their own individual prejudices that America is not about to stand for any distinction between nationality groups or colors or religions, or whatever it may be. Of course, if that happens, we're in trouble in this country. We don't want to see that happen. I'm glad to see the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. I think therein lies the greatness of a man like President Johnson, a man who comes really from the South, from Texas, not only as a Majority Leader of the Senate, but also as Vice President and President of the United States--has really done more to tear down these walls that I've been talking about than any other President. And I think history will

bear me out on this.

M: Where do you suppose Lyndon Johnson got his interest in this?

L: I think the President must have had this deep compassionate feeling for some of the maligned and downtrodden, the oppressed people of the State of Texas. And this includes the Mexican-Americans.

M: Is it true that he has stressed in his executive agencies equal treatment of minority groups? This is supposedly one of the stories in the books and so forth that they've talked about.

L: I bear witness to that statement. I'm here in this office as a member of the National Transportation Safety Board because of his interest in seeing that Mexican-Americans be given an opportunity to serve their country in positions of responsibility, policy-making positions in government, and that if they are qualified and they conduct themselves in a manner that is compatible with what the President desires, excellence in public office, then I'm happy that I was chosen by him to serve government.

M: Does he make a special effort to choose people from minority groups, or does he take the men with the best talent regardless of race, creed, color, et cetera?

L: Well, I would say that he wants the best people with the best talent. But where he shows interest in some of the minority groups is that all things being equal if you give me four or five people that can discharge a given responsibility to serve government in an honorable and a very active, and with ability, I think a decision has to be made that at least consideration be given to a Mexican-American, to a Negro American, to a Jewish American, or whatever it may be. Because I kind of believe that that's the way it should be.

Now, if that kind of a feeling, if that kind of an understanding comes from the top, and that means from the President himself, it permeates all agencies of government to give everyone an equal break. All things being equal, give them a chance to come into government and participate in it, and see that whatever peculiar talents that they may have, the knowledge of a language, the knowledge of the culture of a given people, that they can serve the government better in certain respects than many other Americans. And I'm not detracting from any of the others that have come into government; they're doing an excellent job.

I was happy to see the President, for example, create an agency--an interagency--for Mexican-American Affairs because I think it is proof of his interest, of not just saying, "Give everyone an equal chance," but matching whatever he says with deeds and carrying it out. And I'm not talking about campaign promises only. I'm talking of something where he has peculiar ability and interest in helping people to help themselves. And to that extent I commend the President. And if this interview is looked upon or read in many years to come, I just say that on October 21, 1968, I said that the President in my estimation has done more for the forgotten Americans--whatever their nationality background may be--get a better break, a better opportunity to serve government. And I feel that in the long run, this will be one of the outstanding achievements on the part of the President of the United States.

M: Well, with that as a good prefacing statement, let me ask you about your first meetings with Lyndon Johnson. Where did you first meet him?

L: Well, I first met President Johnson, as I recall, in 19--I mean, on a personal basis to where I shook his hand and was able to talk to him for a little while--as I remember in 1958. That was ten years after he was first elected to the Senate of the United States.

You've got to understand that from the very beginning, I would say since 1948 when he was running for the Senate, the people of South Texas have always supported and liked Lyndon B. Johnson. There was always something about him that showed interest to help our own ethnic group. And not only our own, I'm sure German Americans, Polish Americans--he has got a special affinity and interest in minority groups. And I for one can say that South Texans have always been some of his most loyal supporters for this reason.

M: Well, he campaigned in there--

L: And he campaigned in South Texas, very definitely.

M: Do you remember any of the campaigns?

L: Do you know that I don't remember those campaigns; maybe that's the time when I was going to college. I don't remember the time that he was going to Laredo during the campaign years of 1948. I think I was in college then. Then Daddy, I think, was in failing health at that time, and I don't recall seeing him. Let me put it that way.

But he had a lot of friends and a lot of supporters in Laredo.

M: But your first real recollection of him was in 1958?

L: Yes. And do you know what the occasion was? Well, the occasion was a national convention of the League of United Latin American Citizens that were meeting in Laredo. I think it was July of 1958. And I remember very definitely that he made an appearance and as usual everyone was tremendously happy, first of all, because he had accepted

the invitation to speak at the national convention, and the special message that he had for the assembled group. Again, we're talking of people all over the Southwestern part of the United States. Again, confirming his abiding faith and support for the problems of the Spanish-speaking people in America, he had been true to the finest principles of giving everyone an equal opportunity for education and upgrade their own job opportunities. I think it was a great occasion. We were all very proud of the fact that he was there, and that he was our principal speaker.

I also remember that he was given a very special gift on that occasion. It was a likeness of the President that was hammered out in silver. I hope that he still has it. There's a plaque in there where it says that it was given to him by the LULACs in Laredo. It is hammered out in silver and it was a copy from a magazine cover picture of TIME Magazine, and he was very happy with it. I hope maybe some day it'll hang at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library at the University. It was a great gift, and he liked it.

M: Well, you met him there?

L: I met him there and had occasion to visit with him momentarily. Mr. Felix Tijerina, as I remember, was the national president then.

Comes 1960 and then, of course, he's our nominee for the Vice Presidency. He went to Laredo then. Well, first of all, he went to Laredo--I remember this, he went to Laredo in 1956, I believe, when Adlai Stevenson who was the Democratic nominee for President of the United States. And I remember this very distinctly, that he took a young man to Laredo and introduced him to those assembled. He said, "I want you to keep in mind that this young man here with whom

I serve in the Senate right now may well be very soon a candidate for the Presidency of the United States." As it turned out, it was a very nice-looking, youthful-looking Senator by the name of John F. Kennedy. And that is another thing that I remember distinctly.

Then comes the campaign of 1960, and again South Texas was very much interested in helping President Johnson, the then- Vice Presidential candidate--

M: Did you help him campaign?

L: Yes, we helped in that area. You know, Laredo people are great when it comes to campaigning. They love to get involved in political campaigns. You know, the excitement, the great interest in the ticket. First of all, a young candidate for the Presidency and our own Senator Lyndon B. Johnson running together on the ticket--it was a winning one.

M: You were not disappointed when Lyndon Johnson took the Vice Presidency?

L: No, I was not. I thought it was an opportunity for this country to get to see a man who knows intimately the mechanics of government, who knows how to get things done, because he's a hard-working man. You know, that's one of the things that a lot of people just really don't know about the President. He's a hard-working man; he works at it many, many long hours, much more than a lot of people realize. We knew it because we've known of him for many years. So I was glad to see him take number two, I really was, because I just knew that it would be another step in the right direction, and that was, for the top position.

M: What did you do in the campaign to help him?

L: In the campaign, we just formed speakers bureaus and campaigned on radio

and on TV there locally. And to this day, I read THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1960 by Theodore H. White, and Laredo is mentioned in it at the beginning. It says that President Kennedy, then of course running for the Presidency, knew that the Mexican-Americans were going for him in Texas when he received word that he had carried Laredo-Webb County, Texas, by an outstanding majority. This gives you an indication of what a great and important role the Mexican-Americans played in that campaign in South Texas. And I believe that therein lies the difference of Texas going Democratic in 1960 by 50,000 votes. I think that the Mexican-American played the major key role in saying that Texas went Democratic in 1960 by 50,000.

M: Were you an officer in that local campaign in the Laredo area? What was your exact role?

L: You see, I served in the legislature, as I said, through 1959. And in 1960, I decided to run for District Attorney. There were three of us in the running, and of course we're talking now not of two counties--we're talking about four counties--the 49th Judicial District of Texas. We're talking about Webb, Zapata, Jim Hogg, and Dimmitt Counties. It's a big area, it was possibly bigger than Rhode Island and some of these small states. At any rate, we were again honored with the election for the District Attorneyship; I was running for District Attorney in 1960 at the same time that this campaign of 1960 was going on. So I was part of the entire picture.

M: Well, you were campaigning for yourself?

L: I was campaigning for myself and campaigning for the ticket at the same time. And I always look back to the time that I was sworn in on January 1, 1961, to say that it is also the year, during the same month,

in which President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson were also inaugurated.

Now, in 1964 I was again District Attorney, but I took on a more active role in the national elections. Of course, then it was Vice President Johnson running for the Presidency--for reelection really, in 1964--Goldwater being the Republican candidate.

M: What did you do then?

L: Well, I was the state coordinator for the "Viva Johnson" organization in Texas; so again it was an opportunity to help out with the campaign and particularly to be active in behalf of President Johnson.

M: Let me clear up something. Is the "Viva Johnson" organization an organization formed especially for that election?

L: Yes, it was. In fact, there was another organization in the campaign of 1960. There was the "Viva Kennedy" group who came into being. And in 1964, we had the "Viva Johnson".

M: It was set up to rally the--

L: To rally the Spanish-speaking citizens, the Spanish-speaking vote, that's right. It was most important campaign. And again, we traveled all over the state, or at least in the southern part of the State, and the middle part and the eastern part of the state in behalf of President Johnson.

M: Let me get something else straight here. Where does PASSO fit into all of this?

L: PASSO, as I recall, I hate to really give out information that I'm not really sure of, but as I recall, in 1960 when the "Viva Kennedy" group was formed, to rally the Spanish-speaking citizens in behalf of the Kennedy-Johnson ticket--well, this was the first time really

that any such group or organization had undertaken specifically to rally a special ethnic group. Then after the election, then of course we know that the Kennedy-Johnson ticket won, you know, that PASSO was organized almost by the same leaders that organized the "Viva Kennedy-Johnson" group. And they're still active.

M: Well, PASSO is specifically a political organization?

L: That's right. Well, a political organization, yes, from the very beginning. In other words, as I recall, it's Political Association for the Spanish Speaking Organizations.

M: And it came out of the "Viva Kennedy"--

L: Of the "Viva Kennedy-Johnson" organization.

M: Why was it in 1960 that there was the first organization to really Latin American or Spanish-speaking American votes?

L: I think it was an awareness on the part of a good active innovative political organization.

M: Well, why hadn't it been done before?

L: I really don't know.

M: Why not, say, in 1956?

L: I just don't know. It was the realization on the part of a political organization, I'm talking now about the Democratic organization, really tapping a source of great political power and getting them together and giving them an opportunity to be a distinct organization, grouped and led by their own leaders for a very specific purpose of registering and motivating the political forces within the Spanish-speaking Americans and particularly to get the vote out. Here is a tremendous political force that had not been tapped up to that time, and it was not until 1960 that this was done on a national basis. I believe that

it was a very, very--I think it was a great thing really that came about.

M: In 1964, then, you headed up the "Viva Johnson" group--

L: In Texas.

M: In Texas, right. What was your relationship to PASSO then?

L: PASSO, as I understand it, still had their own meetings; they endorsed their candidates and so on, but I would say the "Viva" groups actually activated only during the campaign. PASSO continued to endorse the candidates on a statewide basis, in some instances on a national basis, because PASSO, as I remember it, originated in the entire Southwest with representatives from Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California?

M: How did you organize Texas in your organization of the "Viva Johnson" organization? What was your structure?

L: Well, the structure really is again picking some leaders from a given region, from a given area, to undertake, to coordinate the political activities of the Mexican-Americans in a given part of the State.

M: So you would make up a list of people that you wanted to help you in a certain area, and then you would contact them?

L: That's true. And then ask them if they wanted to serve in a given capacity where they'd be an area coordinator; where there'd be a county coordinator; or a city coordinator, you know, in other words, the person on whom we were to rely for sending out political paraphernalia. That is, brochures, buttons, stickers, or whatever the case may be. But there was a very definite organization through which all of these things would be channeled.

And giving recognition to some of the leaders of a given area or

a given city or a given county. You see, this is important.

Recognition for what a man can do and what he can contribute is the only reward really that a man has other than the personal satisfaction that he was personally involved in bringing about the successful conclusion of a given campaign in which your own candidate won.

M: What kind of recognition can you give them? What do you do?

L: Well, recognition first of all that he's one of the outstanding spokesman for a given group when you pick him out and you say, "We're going to recognize you as one of the Mexican-American leaders in the Houston area and the Harlingen area and El Paso," and they are to work with the Democratic executive committee of a given county in some instances. You find that there may be some differences of opinion between your own group and the established Democratic group of a given county, so they just go ahead and work toward the same objectives, but under a different organizational setup.

So, what you do really is that in some instances, some of our own leaders really ought to be given credit for rallying our own groups, generating the interest and in getting involved some of our own peoples and getting recognized for those efforts. A lot of times our own leaders are submerged in this organizational hodgepodge-- at times to a point to where their contributions are not discernible. They're not recognized. This organization gives identity, gives recognition, gives them an opportunity to become involved as leaders of a given group, to participate actively in a given campaign.

M: How do these leaders go about getting out the vote on election day? What do they do?

L: They can use television; use radio; mount some loud speakers on a

truck, and go around the different neighborhoods reminding the voters to exercise their franchise, to exercise it in a direction that he feels would most benefit their group, certainly the Democratic Party in this instance, the candidacy of Kennedy and Johnson, and the candidacy of Johnson and Humphrey in '64. So this is how you really bring the issues, explain them to the people. In some instances, you put out special literature in Spanish for the elderly people of a household that never got around to learning English sufficiently so you generate those forces that actually bring about all of this, special equipment, special material, and particularly to emphasize the issues that are of prime consideration and concern to them, the things that are meaningful to us, the things that we feel can most benefit our own people who may find themselves in different circumstances than other ethnic groups or of any given community or state.

M: What did you stress then in the 1964 campaign that was of interest to your people?

L: Well, we stressed many things. First of all, the particular interest and concern that President Johnson had for some of our own problems; that he had proven this interest and concern and had translated this concern into action.

M: Such as?

L: Started the movements about legislation--special legislation on education, on Medicare, on making available to our own people equal opportunity for jobs, to upgrade their opportunities for getting better pay, to see that more people be covered under Social Security, which is really a program that came under a Democratic Administration, under President Roosevelt in 1936-37, as I remember. So what we've

got to tell the people is just what the facts really are. A lot of people just come around and just promise a bunch of things, you know, during a campaign, but once they're elected they forget about the many promises that they made. I think President Johnson and the Democratic Party have never shown this callous disregard for the welfare of our own people.

M: Was the Education Act that came out that allowed aid to students going to church-related schools, parochial schools, was this of any special interest to the Latin group?

L: Anything having to do with helping children have a better opportunity for education is a tremendous help to Mexican-Americans. I'm one of those who believes that the great strides that have been made towards helping our people within President Kennedy's and President Johnson's Administrations is this great interest and concern towards education. And I think that our people are the ones who stand to benefit most because we need it the most. And if we are to battle our way to the top, I think we've got to do so under circumstances where we equip ourselves with the tools with which we can have this greater opportunity for each and every one of us, and as one gets to the top rungs of government that we shouldn't forget those that are still struggling to make it up, and it is this particular concern that is very much apparent in President Kennedy's and President Johnson's Administration. They've never forgotten those who were loyal to them, and that is very much appropriate to Mexican-Americans.

M: In the 1964 campaign you must have come into contact more closely with Johnson than ever before.

L: Yes, I did. And I came in contact with many other friends as well.

Vicente T. Ximenes, the present commissioner in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, was one of the national coordinators of the "Viva Johnson" in 1964. I worked closely with him. Another man--here he comes again--Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez--he was one of the co-chairmen--national co-chairmen of the "Viva Johnson" in 1964. Again, he recognized our efforts in South Texas and he honored me with a position really that I eventually had as state coordinator for the "Viva Johnson" group.

And the President didn't forget. After the election I was one of a tremendous number of people that he invited to his ranch in Johnson City. I still have a picture here to prove it. It was taken at his ranch when he was Vice President, and he has invited me on other occasions. When the Ambassadors to the United Nations visited his ranch in Texas, again, I was one among many other Texans that were honored in being extended an invitation to go to his ranch. And since coming to Washington, by the way, he has invited me twice to formal dinners at the White House. So he never forgets those who in some way have helped him, and I know that he has helped us tremendously.

M: Did he actually contact you to head this "Viva Johnson" organization? Or how did you happen to get into that?

L: Oh, I believe, that it was Congressman Gonzalez who was the one who contacted me to head the "Viva Johnson" coordinating group in Texas. And it was again his recommendation that made the difference. I was happy to do what I could do for the President, but it was really through Congressman Gonzalez who, incidentally, is a great admirer and a great friend of the President, that I was able to head the "Viva Johnson" undertaking in Texas in '64.

M: Now, you were appointed to this National Safety Board when--in 1966?

L: In 1967. I was advised of the appointment on April 5, 1967, and I was sworn in on May 2, 1967, and I've been here since then.

M: What did you do between the 1964 campaign and 1967?

L: Still continued as District Attorney in a four-county area. But in 1966, in September of '66, I received a call from the President's office--it was not the President himself but one of his assistants who called me [to say] that the President wanted for me to serve as a member of the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. And I was appointed one of twenty-five members to the National Advisory Commission. I was serving on that commission, by the way, when I was appointed in 1967 to my present office here as a member of the National Transportation Safety Board.

M: How did they notify you of your appointment to this National Safety Board?

L: By telephone. It was a very happy occasion really. I was advised that the President had appointed me as one of the five members of the National Transportation Safety Board, a new board under the Department of Transportation which had been created in 1966. It was to be an independent, autonomous board to recommend safety measures to the department and the different administrators of the Department of Transportation on all modes of transportation; equally to recommend to the President the different procedures or policies to safeguard our people in whatever mode of transportation there is. And I know that President Johnson had actually been the only President other than President Washington who has created two Cabinet-level departments during his tenure as President of the United States. They've had

the Cabinet-level position of the Department of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development. So this is another great distinction that I know that history will have to bear out the President's concern on urban development, the problems that are peculiar to the cities; the emergent cities have tremendous problems and the problem of transportation. This should have happened a long time ago.

M: Did you have anything to do with the formation of the Department of Transportation?

L: No, I did not. I really did not.

M: So that this appointment to this board was somewhat of a surprise, was it?

L: It was a surprise, but it was along the kind of interest that I had and the kind of work that I enjoyed doing. And I think about my background, about my being exposed, if you want to put it that way, to being an airplane mechanic instructor, if you remember? Also, as an investigator, a lawyer. And now all of that background I'm utilizing to great advantage in my present position. We investigate air carrier accidents, for example. We conduct public hearings as part of an investigation of a given accident at which a member presides, so legal training comes in very handy to run a good, fair, and open hearing. My interest about airplanes and all the technical aspects, of course, certainly we're talking now about more complex and more sophisticated machinery--modern aircraft. My interest and concern about highway safety, railroad safety, and even maritime safety. I'm happy and honored with the President's appointment to this position.

M: Does President Johnson have unusual interest in safety?

L: Yes, and a very unusual interest in consumer protection. That's another

thing, you know, that a lot of people seem to forget. He has done more again than any other President in safeguarding the traveler.

M: Has he ever explained to you why he has this interest in safety?

L: No, he has not. But I think it goes along with his interest for the general public, the average citizen. His interest in consumer protection, for example, very much, I think confirms his great interest for the general public and the average people, particularly the little people, the people that unless you protect them, nobody else is going to look after them. What kind of meat we buy is important--to see that we're not given just any kind--at least, that what you pay for, you get, you see? A lot of people seem to forget about that, but consumer protection is really one of the many feathers in the President's cap. A lot of people are prone to forget about those things. I think it's also equally true of safety. I think that his interest and concern in transportation is the real reason behind the creation of the Department. I think it was long overdue. I think if we are to emerge as the great nation which we are and maintain that place, we ought to see that we upgrade our transportation and to solve some of the problems that are unique in moving people about and to move them safely.

INTERVIEWEE: OSCAR M. LAUREL (Tape #2)

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. McCOMB

October 21, 1968

M: To clear up a point--when you were nominated to this particular board, the Safety Board, were you notified by one of his aides, or how did this come--

L: Yes.

M: Did they call you up on the phone?

L: They called me up on the phone, yes, and of course they told me about the term being involved, and the responsibility that I was to discharge. Of course, this necessitated a little family conference.

M: You were in Laredo at the time?

L: I was in Laredo, that's right. It was in the afternoon when the call came through, and I said, "Well, can I let you know in two or three days?" I think it was on a Tuesday, as I remember, and I said, "How about letting you know by Monday?" as I recall now.

M: Do you remember who it was that called you?

L: I don't remember but it was one of the top aides of the President. But at any rate, I just, first of all, couldn't believe it and then I didn't know what kind of a reception on the part of my family, you know, because it necessitated our moving away from Laredo and our family on my wife's side and on my side, all of whom are living in Laredo by the way on both sides of our family. We've never lived in any other place other than Laredo, and of course it's pretty difficult to uproot yourself; you grow deep roots rather, and it's pretty hard to just pick up and leave. At any rate, I told him that I would get back to him. And he told me, he said, "Well, just call

the White House," he gave me the number, and that's it. "Let me know." So, I got together with my wife. In the meantime, I was supposed to keep this secret, you know. You never know about these things, and I think it is a proper thing to do. A lot of people sometimes don't understand it, but I think that's the way government ought to be. You are given the information, supposed to maintain secrecy about it unless and until something is definite; a decision still has to be made. The question, "Are you available for such a position?" still didn't say the President has appointed you. "Are you interested? Do you feel that you have the qualifications? We know that you do; we've gone over your record; do you feel that you want to engage in such government work?"

So, I got together with my wife and children, and the wonderful thing about it was, "Why don't you call him back right now and just tell him yes, we'll be happy to leave Laredo and go to Washington to work?" Well, I didn't call him right back. What I did, instead of calling him Monday, I called him on a Friday and told him that I was very honored by the President even thinking of us in connection with this appointment; that if he thought that I could make some kind of a contribution to the work that I was to do, that I would be honored by his naming me to the position.

Now, some time passed; rumors in small communities run rampant. A security check has to be made and so many other things, you know. We never revealed anything other than to my immediately family, and I had already told the President's aide that I would have to do this and he understood that. He said so long as it just stays there. But once a security check is undertaken, the rumors start flying

because they get in touch with some of our top professional leaders, civic leaders, and so on; and everybody's wondering, you know, "Where are you going and what kind of a job is it?" In the meantime, you say, "Well, we just don't know." And he says, "Well, I was called upon to give information about you."

Well, at any rate, it was not until about a month or month-and-a-half later that the announcement was made. In the meantime, some members of my family--my brothers and my sisters--were pressing me and said, "What's this I hear? You haven't told us anything. What are you keeping from us?" and all this business. At any rate, we were happy that we were named, we were appointed by the President of the United States to a position and are grateful to President Johnson for it. Our family did move; we're living in Arlington just across the Potomac. I enjoy my work and it's a tremendous challenge because we have other members here who, I believe, are doing a good job in an area that a lot of work has to be done to really discharge our responsibilities.

Our children are enjoying their school; my wife is still not used to the extreme cold weather that we suffer here in the winter as differentiated with our mild cold weather in South Texas, particularly in Laredo. But this is a great opportunity and we like it.

M: I'd like to ask you two miscellaneous questions that come to mind. Have you had anything to do with United States' relationship with Mexico?

L: We have never lost touch with this great interest that I have in our relationship with Mexico. Mainly it's because in Laredo we were very much aware of it. We live on the border; we're very much aware of

it. We live on the border; we're very much aware of the closeness, of the great need that there is for good relationships between not only one town and the other--in this instance, Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, but also as countries. This area of great interest on the part of the President, by the way, has done much to bring Mexico and the United States closer together, and they have a feeling of greater friendship and openness one with the other. I'm not talking only of both Presidents when they see each other going through the abrazo, what they call the embrace that is so typical of people in Mexico, which is, I think, is a wonderful thing. It really shows respect one for the other, and it shows also an affinity, a friendship that manifests itself in trying to resolve some of the problems that are peculiar to both countries.

M: Have you ever been in on any meetings between the Presidents?

L: Yes, I've been at meetings of the--Another agency that the President actually brought about; that is the Commission on Border Development and Friendship headed by Ambassador Telles, Ambassador Raymond L. Telles, former mayor of El Paso, and former Ambassador to Costa Rica. I've attended some of his meetings where people of both the United States government agencies and the counterparts or similar agencies in the government of Mexico meet at least twice a year, as I understand it. It could be more often, but at any rate, on the highest level they do meet about two or three times a year. And I've been to some of those meetings. I've also undertaken here with the board and with the Department of Transportation more of an awareness really of equal employment opportunity for some Mexican-Americans within the different agencies in the department, in which the President has not

only showed a great interest, but has issued memoranda and strict orders to all the members of his Cabinet that this be done. I'm grateful, of course, to Secretary Alan Boyd, the Secretary of Transportation, because of his interest in seeing that these Mexican-Americans and other ethnic groups be given an equal opportunity for jobs.

M: Have you had anything to do with the braserio program?

L: No, I have not. I know that there are some agencies and some people that are directly concerned with those problems.

M: Why were you selected to the Board on Rural Poverty, that advisory board?

L: I believe for the reason of my background maybe, of coming from a rural community--

M: And of course your political connection with President--they knew who you were.

L: That's right. And my interest in some of the problems, rural and ranching, farming problems, is something that we do have in South Texas. I enjoyed, by the way, serving on that commission. I enjoyed traveling, having hearings in different parts of the country about the tremendous problems that we find in rural America. And that's something I believe that our interests should continue on. It's not only an urban problem as such; I think it's an urban and rural problem. I think if we are to examine, to probe deeply into some of these problems, we ought to also look at rural America and what its peculiar problems are. What causes people from rural America to move into the fringes of a given town in expectations of better jobs, better opportunities, but very ill equipped to produce skilled

jobs or to do some skilled jobs, or to offer themselves on a basis where their pay or their wages are not going to be as good as they should be, again, because they're not prepared for the job that they're called upon in the cities to do. But that causes naturally a chain reaction of problems within a given urban society--or problems. So it's strictly not an isolated urban problem. I think we have to go into the rural problems and what causes people to move about and what attracts them there, when they're really not prepared for urban life and some of the many problems that are conducive to urban life.

M: I've got another miscellaneous question for you. Why is it that seemingly there is no strong militant group among the Spanish-speaking Americans that would compare to the militant groups in the Negro community? What's the difference?

L: You know, I've been wondering myself.

M: I mean, is this true that--

L: Yes, it is true.

M: Now why? There are certain similarities in problems--housing--

L: That's what I was going to say. That's very true. We have tremendous frustrations within our own group. We have problems on jobs and health and housing and education--

M: Now, these are common to the Negro.

L: And those are common to the Negro. And yet we don't find this tremendous militancy to a point to where our Mexican-Americans are using violence to bring about a change in the revolutionary fashion as distinguished within evolutionary change. And maybe it's part of our own particular training, our own particular background, maybe.

I do not know what the real reason for it is. All I can tell you is that we have not been as prone to pick up a fight that manifests itself in a way to where injury is going to be done to other fellow citizens or to destroy property, which to me is a most grave situation. I just don't know what the real reason for it is. I like to think that maybe it's because our own people although poor, but they have dignity. I think that their training has shown them in many respects to be long-suffering, to be meditative, maybe, about their problems--

M: Do you think the family structure is stronger?

L: And the family structure certainly is a strong one, maybe not as strong as it used to be though. The father is still the head of the family; he's highly respected and honored by the other members of the family. The moral fabric is still good, and it's still strong. It runs strong in the majority of our families; maybe not as strong as it used to be, again; but I would like to think that there's more cohesiveness in the family structure than you find among many other ethnic groups. And maybe there could be some other philosophical explanation that maybe the sociologists could give you. Who knows? Maybe they say that Mexican-Americans are fatalistic, you know; that they're brought into this world to suffer, to suffer pain and poverty and so on, I don't know. I don't believe that. I don't know that we should. I believe that our opportunities are there, and we have to fight for them. I believe though that if some of the problems of some of our people that are peculiar to some of our people are not given attention to by people in government and in agencies as they've started to, and as they have done within President

Johnson's Administration, I think maybe some of this long-suffering attitude, this passiveness, will manifest itself into more militancy on the part of Mexican-Americans. I hate to see that, but it could very easily happen. People can only suffer so much without really manifesting some of their frustrations into more direct and active and destructive ways. I think that we have come a long ways, but it takes people of President Johnson's interest and compassion that we have made tremendous headway, that some of these agencies have been created to look after the peculiar problems of Mexican-Americans, and the great contribution that they can make to this country and to this government. I think to that extent President Johnson has done more, again, than any other President in really feeling and doing something about some of the problems that have been so much a part of the day-to-day life of Mexican-Americans in this country. We had made tremendous forward strides, and I hope that we will continue to do so. But government cannot turn its head or its back on some of these problems, and I certainly hope that that will not be the kind of a thing that will happen here within the next year or so.

M: Well, that's all the questions I have. I wish to thank you for a fine interview.

L: Thank you so much. I'm glad to be available.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
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Gift of Personal Statement

By Oscar M. Laurel

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Oscar M. Laurel, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

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