

Carrol Norquest Jr. Oral History

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We were assigned the task to interview Mr. Carrol Norquest Jr. who has lived in the Rio Grande Valley all his life. In the Valley he is more commonly referred to as Kelly, his nickname because his father shares the same name and it's a nickname for Karl in Sweden. Norquest, currently at the age of 75 years old was born on November 27, 1934 on his family's farm a short ways from the University of Texas Pan American. His mother's side of the family came from Germany while his father's family hailed from Sweden then moved to Nebraska and eventually to Kansas. In 1925 Mr. Norquest's grandfather traded his farm in Kansas for an eighty acre farm here in Texas. The development companies convinced Midwesterners to come down to the valley with promises of a better life in paradise.¹ The Norquest family came to the area for health reasons. The Rio Grande Valley offered a milder climate than Kansas. From Mr. Norquest's interview we were able to learn in more details the importance of agriculture, population increase, the growth of the University of Texas Pan America, and how the valley has changed and about his childhood.

Agriculture by Roy Paez

Agriculture in the Rio Grande valley was described by the interviewee as being very important to the community in the early part of the twentieth century. He alluded to the fact that it was a great part of the economy at the time and was what most people were involved in. He described his own family as being self-sufficient, and working the land near and around their home that was due north of what is presently The University of Texas Pan-American. They were farmers who rarely went into town, and used what they had to sustain themselves in what they deemed the country. They were able to keep the land that they farmed rich in resources, and when problems did arise, they were able to fix them with the resources that were available to

¹ Miriam Chatelle, *For we love our Valley home* (San Antonio: Naylor Co, 1948). 19

them. It is interesting to note that Mr. Norquest called the land that is located just North of the University as the country; present day residents relate the term country to what is now known as Northern Edinburg- lands that are at least five miles out of the city limits. He described the town of Edinburg as being mostly farm land with few business', and the town square that is still visible today.

Agriculture was a big source of revenue for the valley, and has been throughout the ages, though different crops have been grown in different eras. The resources that were produced in the valley were taken north and south by trains that were built for that very purpose, to import and export natural resources, and people. Mr. Norquest stated that the land was originally harvested for its rich cotton fields, then its produce, and now mostly its grains. These changes are due to the differences that the land has gone through in the past centuries due to the intensive farming culture that still exists. People were able to earn a decent living by farming and tending the lands that was then available, and for the most part were happy with life being that way.

Population Increase by Roy Paez

The Rio Grande Valley has seen a steady increase in its population throughout the decades. This fact can be attributed to the rail ways that were built here, and the influx of immigrants from the south of the border as well as across the oceans. People came here for the simple living and wonderful year long weather. Most of the people that first came to this land were European immigrants who had previously lived in the northern part of the United States. They traveled here by train, and brought their families and traditions along with them.

Demographics in different areas have changed as well; some parts of the valley that were mostly inhabited with Anglo people are now multicultural societies and act accordingly. People

have changed along with the local cultures. It is interesting to see that many parts of the Valley contain people of all cultures that have come here within the last century. The land in antiquity did not have many inhabitants; the same cannot be said for the present day society that now exists. There are people everywhere in the Valley, from its farthest reaches to its most inner city communities.

University of Texas Pan American by Adrian Alonzo

Mr. Kelly Norquest Jr.'s father's history with the University of Texas Pan American is very significant and crucial. He first began to discuss with us about how many different farmers had owned various acres of the land that The University of Texas Pan American now sits on. He remembers when his father and he would wake up early mornings to begin irrigating the fields and slowly preparing them along with their field workers for crop growing. He had stated that he remembers when they first built drainage and irrigation systems so that water could be easily distributed along the area far more productively than the old way of sucking salt water out of the ground by windmills. He had even implied that the same irrigation systems he remembers seeing growing up are still around campus today. They are located on the corner of Sugar and Chapin Street. Now they are brightly decorated with the symbols of different groups on the university's campus.

When the city officials along with the rest of Hidalgo County had come together to see where the best site to replace the previous existing Edinburg Community College would be, his father Mr. Kelly Norquest Sr. insisted that the land he had been farming which was just on the west side of the rail road tracts was the most suitable place for the site. His father suggested that he had known the land owners very well since he had been farming their land for quite a while

and offered to make a deal with them so that he could obtain their lands and make the suitable area for a prestigious University to be built. He remembers that at the time Edinburg was not a very pleasant place to live since there was not much to do and many had gone to get educated in other places.

A University was the perfect way to satisfy the needs of the growing population in the Rio Grande Valley. It has given the population of this Valley the ability to have a better life by choosing to follow a path to higher education. The University of Texas Pan American has grown drastically since its humble beginnings before Mr. Norquest Sr. offered his farmland to the city. As it continues to grow, hopefully we continue to see the positive impacts that this university has brought to the people of the area.

Childhood and Schooling by Erica Rivera

Mr. Norquest was born on his family farm which at the time was considered out of city limits. He recollects that in those days the doctor came out to people's houses instead of people having to visit the doctor's office like today. Looking back on his childhood Kelly thinks that the people of today might see it as crude and rugged but in those days it was considered normal. Like many children of that time he helped out on the farm by tending to the animals and going into town to sell products and buy necessary supplies.

Kelly's house had no electricity and consequently no A.C unit. His house was built for carbide lamps but they mostly used kerosene lamps for light. Mr. Norquest does not remember what his mom cooked with but he does remember that there was a wooden stove in the center of the house with a chimney so it could take out the smoke. As a child he does not remember being oppressed by the heat and recalls that the evenings were actually cool. His family would leave

the windows to their rooms open and it would let in a nice breeze and a lot of dust so they had to constantly be cleaning the house. Kelly's house received electricity sometime before the war in 1940. After electricity he also acquired indoor plumbing. His house also attained A.C. after he came back from serving in the military in the 1960s.

The Norquest family grew a lot of their own produce and sold the extra to the stores in town. Neighbors would get together to kill hogs and some even had smokehouses. People would make their own butter and cream from their dairy cows because money was short due to the depression. To make a little extra money Kelly would sell chickens to a grocery store that was located where the Museum of South Texas History is located today. He distinctly remembers the grocers killing the chickens in an empty lot across the store so that they could put them on display.

The schools that Mr. Norquest attended were built in the late 1920s. Two elementary schools, the junior high, the high school, and the junior college were all within a two block radius. The schools had a lot of windows to make up for the fact that they did not have A.C. Kelly went from first to third grade at Sam Houston elementary school. For fourth through sixth grade he attended another school. This school also housed the junior high which was years seven through eight and on the second floor of the same building was the high school. The science building of this same school was also shared with the junior college students.

Edinburg had one of the biggest school districts at the time. Mr. Norquest would walk or ride the bus to get to school. When Mr. Norquest enrolled in the junior college it had just been turned into a four year university. It had gone from being Edinburg Regional College to Pan

American College.²Kelly also recalls that the east side of town was commonly known as the Mexican side while the South was the Anglo side. Sam Houston elementary was reserved for kids who knew English and Stephen F. Austin was for student who had not yet mastered the language. Some of the buildings where Mr. Norquest went to school are currently being used as administration buildings. He looks favorably towards these building and hopes that the city will restore them instead of tearing them down.

Changes in the Valley by Sergio Elizondo

In interviewing Mr. Norquest, he spoke about how he had seen the valley change throughout his life. He describe how when he was a young child most of the Rio Grande Valley was farm land, he spoke how the Valley was full of citrus and onions and other types of fruits and vegetables. Mr. Norquest also spoke how now days there is far less farms than in the past. He recalled how in the upper valley there were more farms and ranches while in the lower valley the bigger cities were replacing the farms and ranches.

Mr. Norquest also remembered how the people changed throughout the time as well. He recalled that there we many Midwesterners that came to the Valley. With the Midwesterners also came different people from many different places for example he spoke of a German community as well as a Polish and a Swedish community. But Edinburg is so close to Mexico and many of the people here intermarried so it is rare to hear a non-Mexican last name. Thanks to the mixture

² *The Transformation*. http://portal.utpa.edu/utpa_main/pres_home/pres_history (accessed May 6, 2009).

of different people from Mexico the different people from the United States the area enjoys an ethnic and religious mix.³ He also said that the he has seen the valley grow economically.

At one point people felt that the valley was the area that time and technology forgot. Now you see modern technology in schools, court rooms, and on the streets. Even the valley's law enforcement community has gotten better. Law enforcement in the valley is now better equipped and trained. Now days you see police cars with computers giving our police officers an edge on fighting crime. They also have G.P.S. monitors in their police cars and a lot of civilian cars also hold this luxury item. The valley is still growing and still has a lot to develop. He spoke of how when he was in school it was a small school where all grade levels were in the building and now some cities have more than two high schools. There is also the fact schools back then only had textbooks and now there are so many different ways to learn.

When we asked Mr. Norquest what he saw for the future of the valley he felt compelled to mention the situation in Mexico. He says he still sees a very bright future for the Valley because in the days of the Mexican Revolution the border became a violent place as well. Regardless of the war the valley was able to prosper and keep going. Kelly feels that this situation is comparable to today and the valley will still keep growing and moving forward despite the unfortunate events in Mexico.

³ EDINBURG, TEXAS. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/EE/hee2.html>. (accessed May 6, 2009)