

Interviewee: Fraga, Felix

Interview: August 10, 2007

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

"History of Mexican Americans in Houston"

Felix Fraga

Interview with: Felix Fraga
Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdes
Date: August 10, 2007
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: University of Houston Center for Public History

EV: I'll give you a little bit more of an explanation...

FF: No, no don't worry about it...

EV: No I want you to know where all this is going to go. This is going to be your little time capsule.

FF: (Signing the release) The date, what is it?

EV: The 10th, no?

FF: Yeah, the 10th, but it's June...July?

EV: August.

FF: 7-07

EV: It's 8-10, it's August.

FF: Oh that's right, *hilo* [golly!] I lost a month someplace...

EV: (laughter). Felix this is the U of H Center for Public History, started off on this program where we want to start recording our own history of the Houston area. It was a subject I wanted and that the faculty at the Center suggested it. I saw only one good book on it and you told me about the one by Luis Cano another one that is dated but we don't

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have a real comprehensive history of... well there is a doctor from U of H that they is doing real well [Arnoldo de Leon, *History of Mexican Americans in Houston*).

FF: Oh that's right...

EV: Yeah, and I'm going a little more detailed than he did in this. But anyway, I'm interviewing as much as I can the Mexican-American who experienced the 60's, the 70's, the 80's, you know. And by the way I found your name when I decided to try to contact you I read, I knew this guy Earl Shorris who was working for a TV station in El Paso back in the 60's when I was living there. After college I went back to El Paso for a year and I started working on this other program with Earl Shorris at KTSM TV. I then I kind of lost track of him and then I saw a book that he had written about his Mexican background, Earl Shorris but he is Jewish and Mexican... which is not uncommon in El Paso. But in his book *Latinos* he had you. Did you know that?

FF: No.

EV: You never saw Earl Shorris book "Latino"?

FF: I don't think so.

EV: You spoke to him about your brother, we'll get into it. You remind me and I'll bring it up.

FF: Sure.

EV: But I'm maybe he got it from another interview that you gave somebody.

FF: Okay.

EV: Anyway, having said all of that, lets pick it up and we'll just do some background first. I'll send you a copy to look over, proof read it, whatever if you want. What is your email, do you have an email at home to get a hold of you?

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FF: My wife has one and I'll have to find that out Ernie and get back to you on it.

EV: That's okay. And do I have your telephone number did you give that to me?

FF: No that's not on there it's, the house is 713-923-5594.

EV: Okay, that's where I get a hold of you?

FF: No, you call me at the office. It's 713-669-5218.

EV: Where's that?

FF: Neighborhood Centers it the main headquarters they run Ripley and several other centers.

EV: I used to be on that board.

FF: Really?

EV: Yeah it used to be Neighborhood Day Care?

FF: Yeah.

EV: I was on that board years ago.

FF: I think I remember that Ernie. I think Malcolm Holst was there.

EV: I don't even remember man, who was back there... You know there were so few of us out there we were all the board.

FF: Yeah, everybody who was Hispanic would pick on the same guy...

EV: Yeah, me, David Lopez, we were all on the different boards and I just, I just got burned out. It's not that the board takes so much time it's the committees they appoint you too.

FF: Yeah and the number of boards they get you on.

EV: Yeah. Okay, let me have your full name...

FF: It's Felix Fraga.

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EV: And what is your date of birth?

FF: October 30, 1929, the day after the stock market fell.

EV: (laughter) And where were you born?

FF: Here in Houston in Second Ward. In fact in a house I was delivered by a, what do you call those?

EV: *Partera*? (Midwife)

FF: Si. (Yes)

EV: Were you the oldest one?

FF: No, no there was six of us, six boys and I was the third one.

EV: Six boys, can you name them all?

FF: Yeah, Joe and Frank. Joe passed away first he was the oldest. Frank just passed away three weeks ago, and then myself. And then Angel, and then Tom, Guadalupe.

EV: Lupe is the baby?

FF: Yeah.

EV: And where did your family come from? Were they here from Houston?

FF: No, No. San Luis Potosi.

EV: And what were their names?

FF: My dad was Felix and my mother was Angela.

EV: Do you know when they came here?

FF: In the early twenty's, well I think my dad came first. You know, he left I think during the Revolution [Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920], somewhere he left in 1910, I guess he came on across. And he worked building the railroad I think he worked in

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Baytown, *tambien* [also], coming in when they were building the refinery. And I think my mom came down in the mid-twenty's, early twenty's...

EV: Were they already married?

FF: I don't know whether she came to marry him here... I'm so sorry I never really looked into or asked them too much about it. I understand he had a daughter from another marriage or another lady... and

EV: You've never met her?

FF: No, I just remember her vaguely. She would have been the oldest, she was the oldest than any of the boys...I think... In fact I don't know if my oldest brother Joe, yeah he must have been from this marriage because he looked like my mom.

EV: What was it like here, keep in mind that future Historians are going to come and listen to these tapes.

FF: I understand.

EV: What was it like here in Second Ward?

FF: Well like I said, I was born the day after the Depression... so it was poor. And we just had our own little, sort of corner or segment of the whole population. You know, about three blocks from where I live east, this way was as far as any Mexican kid would go. God, remember there was a beautiful park just a few blocks of where we played on a vacant lot, around the corner in fact, and we never saw it.

EV: Really, they wouldn't let you into it?

FF: Yeah they wouldn't let us into it. And I guess by that time the older guys knew and we followed their lead, I mean they wouldn't even try... so, but that stays in my memory. We played in this vacant lot in the short block around the corner was a

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beautiful ball field. When I did see it, it all this time, we pretty much stayed in our own place. And I didn't feel it. I mean you pretty much just figured everybody's Mexican.

EV: Were the Anglos here then, were the Czechs, or Poles?

FF: See this neighborhood was originally German, in fact Canal Street, which is one of our main streets used to be called German Street, this was called Germantown. This is one of the first parts of Houston that was settled and it was settled by German people. And then when they moved out it became Jewish, and, at one time, Italian. I used to have a professor at the U of H, history professor, real nice guy, and he on a tour of the center, he pointed to a house and said, "I used to live in this house and right down the street."

EV: Really?

FF: (laughter) Yeah but you know as much discrimination as there was we sort of didn't feel it because you just stayed in your own...

EV: Right, stayed in your own enclave.

FF: Yeah, and you went to the movies and you knew which theatres you could feel comfortable in and which ones you probably shouldn't even try to get in. Haircuts, barbershops, you just knew your place I guess and it wasn't... now that I think about it you don't seem to let it bother you that much.

EV: Was that central market place downtown around the courthouse when you were growing up?

FF: Yeah.

EV: And they had, I think Carmen Orta told me her father or uncle...someone in her family had a store there.

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FF: Yeah along Congress Street coming east was sort of Mexican downtown, Azteca

Theatre, a pharmacy...

EV: Oh that's right, right by the [Buffalo] bayou...

FF: No, no it was not close too the bayou, on Congress.

EV: Yeah on Congress but I mean at the bottom of Main Street, I mean...

FF: No, no. It was further east. It is more like where the ball field {Minute Maid Park] is now. In fact, the ball field was built in sort of the part of town that was Mexican town.

EV: Okay, I forgot, I thought that one that was right by where the...oh, I don't remember that neighborhood in there, right where the Pan American bank used to be.

FF: No, it was the Ritz.

EV: Okay you're right...

FF: The Ritz later became Mexican movies.

EV: Well wasn't there also a Mexican barrio or central market place around where the old, the downtown fire station used to be in that area?

FF: Yeah, well it was a farmers market. It started out for everybody and eventually due to the Depression and years later, it became more the minority because it's where you could get fruits and vegetables very inexpensively. And then there was what they call the Produce Row there on Commerce where the warehouse, the Spaghetti Warehouse is now. You know where that is?

EV: Yes.

FF: Commerce, I mean Main and then Travis and Milam, those two blocks was called Produce Row and every time the guys that went on sale, the produce in the

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neighborhoods and trucks would go there and buy that from the warehouses. And we would go in the mornings before school, pick up bananas, tomatoes, anything that fell off the trucks that the guys let us pick up. (laughter) It was about a 15-block walk from the house but we'd go in the morning before we went to school...

EV: To pick up your lunch?

FF: To pick up our lunch in a sense yeah.

EV: What, do you remember the address where you were born and where you all were raised?

FF: Yeah, on Commerce and Saint Charles, I guess they tell me it was the house I was actually born in. And then we lived within three blocks of that area...

EV: Was the Rusk there at the time?

FF: Yeah we went to Rusk Elementary, went to Rusk school.

EV: Because I recall the settlement was the one on the other side of the school playground right?

FF: It was actually on school grounds. When the school was building a permanent building, I think Rusk was the third oldest school in the city. I think the first one was Elementary Fannin and then Lubbock and then Rusk, 1903, I think. Because in 1907 is when the Neighborhood Center started at the Rusk Settlement. These ladies, there was a house that was going to be destroyed where the school building was going to be, and these ladies asked the school district or the city or somebody if they could have that house. They wanted to move it back to where the school was, would there be room if the school was going to be built in one area of the property, move it back. The school district agreed and let them start a settlement house. It's called Rusk Settlement House.

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EV: Did you go to church at Guadalupe?

FF: Yeah, baptized there.

EV: And did you ever hear there was a Catholic church in Magnolia?

FF: Yeah.

EV: But it was European, many Europeans... and they wouldn't let Mexicans go there, so they...

FF: They sent the priests over there.

EV: That was true?

FF: Yeah. I mean I heard it, I wasn't living there. But I think the Guadalupe started in 1912 or something like that, maybe 1920 somewhere in there.

EV: Yeah because I read somewhere that they, Mexicans tried to have, even their own service they said, "No you can't use this building at all."

FF: Yeah. They would send a priest over there. They had an old wooden frame house or building that was church and school. I think church on the bottom and school on the top.

EV: Yeah over here? I saw pictures of that.

FF: Quite a building, two story.

EV: But that was kind of the first educational, first school for Mexican-Americans.

FF: Yeah.

EV: Even public schools weren't around.

FF: Lets see... very few. I remember in the early 40's LULAC had to fight a case to get kids to go to school, a school just down the block here from us, Mexican kids. They had their own school De Zavala for this part of town. People who lived in front of the

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Franklin school [elementary] would have to go down to De Zavala, they wouldn't... the

early 40's, I think one of the first cases that LULAC...

EV: The early 40's...

FF: Yeah the early 40's...

EV: Well the thing that I had read about in that Earl Shorris book recording you was the kids that lived across the street from the school couldn't go to that school they had to go to...

FF: Yeah...

EV: You don't remember that interview at all?

FF: Now it's coming back to me, because I think I repeat this to somebody else before. (laughter). Yeah because just across the street, yeah that and then LULAC came along and I think they won the case, and maybe was the first crack into the segregation. The school I went to, there was one Anglo girl that lived there and went there but the rest of us were Hispanics.

EV: Well you know I saw some old pictures of Guadalupe School and you have all these little *morenitos* [dark-skinned] and then on little *güera* [fair-skinned] I wonder if that was her.

FF: No, no I'm talking about Rusk.

EV: Oh.

FF: I didn't go to Guadalupe. You had to pay a little something I guess and our parents just couldn't afford it or thought it would be easier to send us to Rusk.

EV: All these hungry boys...

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FF: (laughter). We did go to Guadalupe in the summer for *la doctrina* I never knew what that word means but it means “doctrine.” “Doctrine” sounds a little harder, harsh than *doctrina*. At Rusk, you know, like I say, there is only one little Anglo girl I remember, I think I remember he name was Vera and because they lived in the community, I don’t know why they didn’t move out. They had a nice house; I guess it was a big house. But everybody else Hispanic... You know I remember, Ernie, that they told us, I guess at the early grades if you need to go to the rest room and say, “May I be excused.” And I think we never learned the word for rest room, you know. So when we had to go we used to raise our hand and say, “May I go to the *be excused*.” (laughter)

EV: That happened in El Paso too.

FF: ¿*De veras?* [Really?]

EV: Si. My uncle said they noticed when the Anglo kids wanted to go to the rest room, they would say, “May I please go to the restroom?” So the Mexican American kids raised their hands and asked, “May I go to the *be excused*.” I became incorporated into our everyday slang as adults so if you’re in an unfamiliar we still ask for the *be excuse*.

FF: Yeah because you wanted to go so you... I’d tell my friends, “You’d be in trouble if you went downtown and asked somebody, ‘where’s the *be excused* here’”

EV: I was at the Inns of Court remember, a club they had for lawyers down town. And your *tocayo* [namesake] Salazar [Felix Salazar] was holding court and he said, he said, “*tengo que ir al be excuse*” (“I need to go to the *be excused*”) (laughter). It kind of all came back to me I haven’t heard it since I was a kid in school.

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FF: Boy he would have been a great guy to interview because he lived in Magnolia so he probably lived through days of De Zavala days and you couldn't go to Franklin... But you know, I'm glad we didn't feel bitter or... Maybe we should have been angry, I don't know. I'm glad the older guys, LULAC's and them were the ones there that, you know....

EV: Well did you all speak Spanish in your home?

FF: Oh yeah.

EV: And then so, so you went to school at elementary school at Rusk.

FF: At Rusk, yeah.

EV: And where did you go to middle school or did you just go straight to...

FF: No, then you had, we used to call them junior highs... Marshall, which is on the North side and then Davis [High School]. I remember one time my brother Frank, Joe didn't go, I think Joe didn't make it to junior high. You know the oldest always has the roughest time they have to drop out and go to work and everything. We still used to sell newspapers and I'd follow him, all three of us, the first job we had was selling newspapers. In those days you sell newspapers in the streets, you don't see that anymore. And so Joe didn't even get to middle school or junior high. Frank did. One time he showed me a picture he and an Anglo guy had where one of his best friends had his arm around and that was the first time I had ever seen a Mexican kid with an Anglo friend, you know.

EV: In school?

FF: Yeah. Because even when I went to school we didn't make friends that easily with the Anglos. You know we sort of stayed in our place, you know. But he was the

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first, my brother Frank was the first guy I knew that was Mexican and had an Anglo friend. I remember that impressed me. I always remember that.

EV: Did you play any sports when you were in school?

FF: Yeah, baseball in high school. They didn't have it in middle school but that's all we did for recess and recreation. And we used to play there's an esplanade on Navigation St., I don't know if you've seen it.

EV: Yeah.

FF: I'm amazed how narrow it looks now. We used to play baseball there, football...

EV: Really, on that esplanade?

FF: Yeah, back then traffic was slow and very light.

EV: The burros would move over...(laughter)

FF: But that was our playground. And gosh we thought we had it made, you know.

EV: There's one in my neighborhood up there where we used to play it was kind of triangular because it has a little curve around this side and... but it's real small and I drove by there when I was home a couple of years ago and man...

FF: Every time I see it now I think... How did we run the end runs?.

EV: I'm surprised you didn't hit more home runs...(laughter) So then you completed high school at Jeff Davis?

FF: Yes.

EV: And did you... were you like Honors Society, the Latin Club or any of those kinds of things?

FF: No, they didn't have that much. But then again, I don't know, it could have been that in my graduating class there might have been ten Hispanics at the most.

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EV: Well that's right, that was an Anglo settlement too.

FF: Oh yeah.

EV: Was it Italian?

FF: Italian, but then northsiders. It was one of the earlier high schools, in the mid twenties. I don't know when it was open there were just three or four high schools. And those of us that wanted to play sports, which I was one of those guys, went there, we somehow we'd squeeze in there because we were supposed to go downtown to Sam Houston which didn't have a play ground or ball field or anything (laughter). So you didn't go to Sam Houston unless you just had to by force, they would almost force you I guess.

EV: So where is it located?

FF: On Rusk and Caroline, you know where the Post Office is?

EV: Oh yeah.

FF: Just across the street from there.

EV: Oh yeah that used to be...when I came here that was the [HISD] Administration Building.

FF: Yes. The school board met there and everything, yeah. It used to be called, eventually called Central High, I think it was the very first high school built in Houston.

Lyndon Johnson was a teacher there in the early, mid-thirties, history teacher.

EV: Really? So then you went to college?

FF: Yeah.

EV: Where did you go to college?

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FF: U of H. What happened too, because I guess when I was in 9th or 10th grade I started working at Rusk Settlement. You know went there as a kid they would send us for pre-school program that's how they recruited us. But our parents' sent us and we went for the meal we got. So one of the first real meals I ever got was at the settlement house. We went there for preschool and then from there just went across the play ground to the school. Then when I got into junior high and by the 9th grade, 8th, 9th grade I was about 15 or 16 already, they hired me at the settlement house for the summer job. And I had intentions of maybe dropping out of school, you know, everybody else was doing it. I don't... I can't remember anybody in the neighborhood having finished high school, at least my two older brothers didn't, they dropped out. And the people at the Rusk Settlement told me if I stayed in school they would let me work there in the summer and after school. So this is 1946 so I became a permanent member of the staff and have been in the staff every since 1946.

EV: Did you happen to know that guy, there was two of them that Mexican Americans that graduated from Rice and one of them worked at Rusk. He lived there, they gave him an apartment?

FF: Yeah, este....Palacios, Colmanades...? [Primitive Niño?]

EV: Yeah strange name but he was from Mexico.

FF: Yeah.

EV: He came here was real poor...

FF: Yeah, in fact, we had a set up a football league and he was our coach.

EV: Really?

FF: Emilio Colmanades I think. Colmanedes.

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EV: Yeah there were two guys, they were the first Mexican-Americans to graduate from Rice.

FF: And the other guy was the name Palacio Gomez, I think...Palacio Gomez I think. I think he finished at Davis.

EV: Palacios is the one I'm thinking of. Yeah and he's the one that they let him live there at Rusk.

FF: And he played basketball I think at Rice.

EV: Yeah.

FF: He was a basketball player from Davis. Gomez I guess was his last name. Polacias Gomez or something like that.

EV: Yeah he wound up working for some big company or something but they were geniuses apparently.

FF: Emilio Colmanades, I think that was his name.

EV: So what inspired you? They are encouraging you at Rusk and then you continued to stay in high school...

FF: Yeah at Rusk. And then they told me that I could keep working there and they would get me a scholarship to the University of Houston. And there was a group of ladies at the Pan American Round Table downtown. I think one of them was on the board of Neighborhood Centers, I guess she told her, "We have a young man that wants to go to the university could you get him a scholarship?" And they got me a scholarship. So my freshman they paid and while I was there I made the baseball team and I finished off with a baseball scholarship the last three years.

EV: Wow.

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FF: And then I continued to work at the center and then they said... And by then we had a working arrangement with the only social work school in the state that had a sequence for what they called "group work." At Texas U they had a social work school but it was just for what they called "case workers" when you worked directly with them individually when they have problems. The settlement group was working with groups and so they said, "We'll send you to school there and you can keep working here." So I didn't have any plans so I went there for....you take it two years because you would have to come back and work a half a year and so I got my masters in social work at Our Lady of the Lake in San Antonio.

EV: So you went to study in San Antonio?

FF: Yeah. Oh yeah that's right they didn't have their branch here at the time.

EV: No, U of H didn't have the social work school. And Texas didn't have what they called group work.

EV: Our Lady of the Lake is the one way on the west end of San Antonio.

FF: Yeah.

EV: Yeah. I taught at Edgewood [Independent School District] for a while.

FF: That's not too far from there.

EV: Yeah right down the road.

FF: Yeah.

EV: And I went to college there too. I went to college at Trinity Univeristy.

FF: Really?

EV: Now did you, let me ask you when you were... after you got out of college did you go to the military, did you go in the service?

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FF: No, I sort of hit it at the right age. I was too old for the First World War, my two oldest brothers went, Joe and Frank. No I was too young for that, I was about 15.

EV: For the Second World War.

FF: Yeah the Second World War. My brother Frank went in, in fact he went in '42 which was just six months after Pearl Harbor and he stayed in for about four years. And then Joe went off about that same time. I don't know if Joe was drafted, Frank volunteered for the...oh they were both volunteers because Joe was in the Air Force. I didn't need a deferment because I was still too young to join. And then when the Korean War came I was too old and I had two brothers, Angel I think went to the Korean War and then Tom I think also.

EV: What was Angel, what branch of the service did he go into?

FF: Army.

EV: Did he?

FF: Yeah. Angel went to Sam Houston, by that time they were stricter. It would be harder to get to Davis. I was able to get to Davis.

EV: Stricter in what way, what do you mean?

FF: I mean you mean they make you go to the school where the district where you live, in Sam Houston.

EV: Oh, yeah, yeah... Did you have a rough time at U of H, I mean when I came here they were notoriously discriminatory against Mexicans.

FF: No I didn't sense it. I mean being on the baseball team maybe made it a little easier, maybe. No I don't remember being any difficulty. There weren't too many of us there.

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EV: And you got your masters in Sociology?

FF: Well at U of H I got a bachelor's in Sociology or Social Science and then the masters was in San Antonio.

EV: Was that MSW?

FF: Yeah.

EV: Okay and did you go straight from U of H to Our Lady of the Lake?

FF: Yeah.

EV: Did you have a scholarship there when you got there?

FF: Well by that time the agency had worked agreement with them, the agency paid for it.

EV: Neighborhood Center?

FF: Yeah, Neighborhood Centers with the idea that you come back and do your field work here so they could get some if it back.

EV: Well you've been with Neighborhoods...

FF: Yeah, since '46.

EV: Pretty much your whole life?

FF: What is it 61 years...?

EV: Golly!

FF: I met my wife here at *tambien*.(also).

EV: Oh did you really?

FF: Yeah.

EV: How is she doing?

FF: Fine, you know Nellie, she's from Ecuador.

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EV: You know I didn't know that.

FF: Yeah and they... the agency here would have a program, we had a director that was real gung ho on being international and everything. He said one way to get the people in this community to accept Hispanics was to bring and educate Hispanics from South America to live here in the Center so people could see all the Hispanics weren't just like the ones that grow...

EV: Really, where were they going to find them, they wouldn't let us in school?

FF: I mean that's why he thought this would be one way... But anyway there was a program to bring in social workers every summer to spend the summer here and my wife was one of those groups.

EV: And they brought the right one.

FF: (laughter) For me anyway...

EV: Did you all have any children?

FF: Yeah.

EV: How many did you have?

FF: I have three boys. We lost our first one, he was five, caught Meningitis and then our two oldest boys went onto the Air Force Academy.

EV: Oh really?

FF: Yeah and they had a great experience.

EV: Are they still in the service?

FF: No they left, I mean they put in about 15 years. In fact the oldest one has got his doctorate in chemistry, he's a chemist now working in a lab in Washington state. And the youngest one made Captain, in fact he is doing social work in Saint Louis. He was

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stationed at Scott Air Force base here in Saint Louis and he just stayed there. And we hope he might come back home someday.

EV: Yeah, it's rough having your kids out. *¿Ya eres abuelito me magino, verdad?* [I guess you're a grandfather by now?]

FF: Yeah the youngest one is not married yet...

EV: So it was almost a natural move for you to finish school and you were already obligated to come to work for...?

FF: And not even, I don't know if I was obligated but I, it was the kind of work that I took to and I didn't mind and I just continued at it to this day.

EV: Did you continue playing ball all this time?

FF: Semi-pro a little. I remember I went to Victoria one time, one summer to play. And this is the first time I had ever been denied a service. Oh, here I guess you knew where to go, but I went to get a haircut one Saturday morning and I happened to go into an Anglo barbershop, which I didn't realize I was... They told me, "No you have to go down the street over here." (laughter) I didn't feel bad because these guys don't know me so they are not turning me down because they don't like me but just those were the customs over here. Over here you went to your Mexican barbershop and over there I just didn't... the first barbershop I saw I went in. But..."you have to go down the street."

EV: Did you ever know a guy by the name of Eduardo Gutierrez who played the piano in the Second Ward?

FF: Yeah sounds familiar.

EV: He is the first Mexican-American concert pianist with the Houston Symphony and he's from the Second Ward.

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FF: My God.

EV: And I can't find anybody that has ever met him.

FF: I don't remember that...

EV: He would have been a little old, probably your brother's age because he passed away maybe ten years ago or something...

FF: Son of a gun, I didn't realize that from the Second Ward...Eduardo...

EV: Yeah, Eduardo.

FF: God I hope we can prove it... or document it so...

EV: I've got it documented. The Houston Symphony sent me a playbill of when he was, or of him in concert and what they were going to play and it's got Eduardo Gutierrez.

FF: You know when your growing up you don't even know there is a symphony (laughter). You don't... those kind of things don't stay with you.

EV: Yeah in El Paso I was kind of lucky because by of weird set of circumstances, I was raised in an Anglo neighborhood. My family left Mexico during the revolution and then they went to this area that was blank at the time. My grandfather bought this acreage and *en un arroyo* [a gulley] between these two mesas. Well after my grandfather built his little ranchito down there, those two mesas got built up by very wealthy people. So the only elementary school that was two blocks from me was the Anglo school. And plus my grandfather was on the school board, he was the first Mexican-American on the school board. So they weren't going to say, "No you can't go." And because my mother was half and half, her last name was Mattox so nobody said anything to her...

FF: And you were light-complexioned you could pass if you wanted to...

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EV: Yeah that's another very strange thing that we need to talk about sometime. It's an interesting situation. But that was a really strange situation in El Paso the way that comes out because you either assimilate or your güero, because there were maybe three or four other Mexicanos that were there that were not, that were *morenitos* [dark skinned] you know, and as I recall only one of them spoke with an accent but his father was a doctor. So they couldn't discriminate there, but I went to school with all these guys, you know, all these rich Anglos and Jews and stuff and it was...It had come, by the time we got to high school, the only friends I had were these Mexicanos that I knew from elementary school and all these *bollios* [slang for "Anglo"] and so *la raza* [the Mexican American people] at El Paso High School would say, *como te cres, carbon*. [you think too highly of yourself]

FF: Yeah I remember that....(laughter)

EV: And that was... you know, *te van a fregrar*, I they're going to get you. But anyway, but see I didn't speak *pachuco* [slang] Spanish. My grandmother would not permit it in the house. She said, "You speak good Spanish. Don't come here with *ese vato*, [slang for "this guy"] that's not spoken here."

FF: Like the words *la jura* [slang for "the police"] I understand it's the correct word.

EV: La jura, yeah.

FF: We used to call it police la jura but I understand it's a good word...

EV: It's a perfectly good word.

FF: Because it comes from "judge" "jurado"....

EV: I thought *greña* [hair] was a slang word.

FF: La greña, si.

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EV: It's not, it's a perfectly good word.

FF: And we had the long-haired guys. Did you all have those?

EV: Oh yeah, duck tails in the back...

FF: Yeah. And then the only... the term long hair was classical music.

EV: Yeah. (laughter)

FF: They don't use that term any more for classical music?

EV: What, long hair? No they don't.

FF: But the conductors were all long-haired.

EV: Yeah they were all long-haired. Okay, now we left off... so you, I think I was trying to get to how you evolved into Ripley House is how you might want to go. So how did that happen?

FF: Well like I said I started going to Rusk Settlement when I was a preschooler.

EV: But Ripley House wasn't here yet?

FF: Oh no, but Ripley House was the headquarters for Neighborhood Centers. And Rusk Settlement was part of Neighborhood Centers. But here again this was for the Anglo kids. There was... between the Ripley House and Rusk Settlement were maybe a mile and a half apart I guess. And some way sort of half way there Mexicans were to the west and Anglos to the East and we couldn't come to Ripley House, we'd go to Rusk Settlement. In fact we played in a basketball tournament back when I was about 16. We used to call it... the Houston Press had a tournament for all the kids. We were in it. One year we got to the point to where we got into the semi-finals I think. And Ripley House had the only, it was built in 1940, it had a beautiful gym. So they put the semi-finals over here at Ripley. We came to play over here. I remember we had to come in the back door

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and leave the back door to the game. (laughter) I mean it wasn't the policy of the agency but the kids made you know which door you came in and which way to leave. So early on, you know, we couldn't use Ripley, I don't even know if we knew it was here until we made that basketball semi-finals.

EV: Really, you haven't been this far east?

FF: No, we wouldn't come more than oh, five, six blocks. And again you, I don't know why you didn't...

EV: Hijo [oh man], you didn't question it?

FF: No, and it didn't necessarily bother us. I mean we had enough to deal with there. The one that I keep getting amazed at was it was just around the corner where we played at the vacant lot, in fact they had bulls and sometimes cows there. One time my older younger, brother was wearing a red shirt playing right field and the bull ran after him (laughter). I don't know if it was because he was wearing that red shirt or because he ran after a ball. God I just keep...

EV: They had that at the park the real nice park you were talking about, they had bulls out there?

FF: No, no the place where we were playing, just a block from where the park was. And first of all we didn't even know the park was around there. We just didn't go that direction. We would come back toward our direction, you know. And I know they surely didn't invite us to come over or even let us know it was there.

EV: You know when I was working I worked for HISD my senior year of law school. That's when they had the *huelga* [strike against HISD desegregation order 1970].

FF: Oh yeah, yeah.

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EV: And I was working for HISD at that time. And I was supposed to be George Garver's ombudsman to the Mexican-American community, which sounded great when I, in the Spring of the year when they offered me the job. In the meantime I finished up where I was working. I think I was working for HCAA [Houston Community Action Association – the local Community Action Program] at the time. And that summer I did some other work and I took some classes and then I went on vacation and I was going to come back and start September the 1st and I called in and they said, "Come down the Mexicans are striking the schools, there's this big huelga going on." I said, "What!" and that's when I first started.

FF: Leonel Castillo was involved in that?

EV: Yeah, yeah MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Foundation], Leonel and a whole bunch of other people and it was wild man.

FF: Was it Austin High School?

EV: It was all the schools they boycotted all of the schools.

FF: Yeah that's right.

EV: And they set up little schools everywhere.

FF: Yeah the *escuelitas* [schools] I remember that, yeah.

EV: So how did you finally wind up in Ripley House as a honcho?

FF: Well you know as time went on, this director we had was hoping to integrate the community eventually and he did it by starting to bring us workers here. And then when I did my fieldwork they had to put me over here because they had to have a staff that could supervise me at that certain level. So I did my fieldwork here and then when I graduated I continued working at Rusk Settlement. And finally as the time passes and

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Hispanics kept moving this way I had friends already, Hispanics already living a guy across the street here... Lewis Hernandez was the first one to ever live outside of the neighborhood this way. And slowly it got to where we could come over here, work over here and at one point they made me the director of the center, I did that for about twenty years.

EV: Yeah, you did that for... do you remember what those years were?

FF: Yeah, when I... after I graduated which was in '52 I did my field work here and I worked here from high school, and from University in '52 and then from social work school in '54. So after I did my fieldwork here and I came back I worked here at Rusk Playground and so from '54 on I worked here part time and finally full time and then finally became the director. I remember I got married in '69 and so by '65 I was already working here full time, that's when my wife came and after we got married in '69 the director retired and by then we had a much bigger organization so the headquarters wasn't here anymore. So this was just like a center as opposed to being a headquarters. And they had let me run it, did that for about twenty years.

EV: So then how... what was the extent of the services that were offered to the community at Rusk... I mean at the...

FF: It was community work. And I think at that time we were stressing the, it's where the War on Poverty came, we became part of that. In fact we were what they called Area Nine and it was....that brought the concept of getting the community organized so they can do for themselves and demand things. So they had what they call community organization, which we got really involved in. And our job as settlement workers wasn't

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too much to run groups but to go and knock on doors and get people to come to meetings, form committees and things like that.

EV: Was it like voter registration, citizenship programs, English classes?

FF: Yeah and pre-schools, committees, committees for this and committees for that.

And it really, I thought it was a real good social work that the city could still benefit from going through those things again.

EV: Is that when you started the clinic here?

FF: Yeah we bring service. We started preschool programs, which eventually became Head Start. No, we had a director that was pretty, you know, had a vision of seeing ahead...

EV: The program you had here became Head Start or was it here because of a result of Head Start?

FF: No it became Head Start. We had preschool education before Head Start was ever around. And I remember LULAC started one along the same time we started, maybe a little after and they called it The School of the 400 Words, Felix Tijerina....

EV: That was the 30's or something...

FF: No, no it was in the 40's.

EV: It was in the 40's okay.

FF: Alfred Hernandez is another guy you should talk to if you get a chance.

EV: Is he still with us?

FF: Yeah and you know I saw him the other night. I was amazed how well he looks. He's almost blind and he's going to be ninety this year.

EV: I didn't realize that...

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FF: And he knows Felix Tijerina he was sort of Felix Tijerina's right hand man as far as doing community work. They started, he sent him all over the state when Felix Tijerina was at one point the LULAC president. I think that was the first time... you know he was the first Mexican that I know that belonged to Rotary and things like that. He was... the Anglos accepted him because they liked his food I guess. He had the Felix Mexican Restaurants.

EV: Yeah I remember that.

FF: And Alfred could really give you a good history of that part. I can try and get his number for you.

EV: If you would...So now when the CAP agency era did, Casa Amigos pre-date your services, medical services here?

FF: No.

EV: Were you here?

FF: Yeah we were here before.

EV: Do you know what happened to Arthur Fernandez by the way?

FF: He went to California but he was the first guy to start from the ground up of the Hispanic that I know that started his own agency. I mean all the agencies up to that point were started by Anglos, not Hispanics you know.

EV: Yeah he was real, for a mild mannered reverend he was pretty tough.

FF: He was a combination of being a Reverend...

EV: He was like a Vince Lombardi of social work.

FF: Yeah I mean I don't know if anybody else could have done what he was doing, you know. Like I said all the Centers were... Wesley House, which was over there close

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to him was started by the Methodist Church and they always had Anglo directors and we always had Anglo directors here. (laughter) and he was the first one.

EV: How did you, as you recall you were appointed by the school board when somebody dropped out and you were appointed...

FF: Yeah.

EV: I mean you didn't run the first time?

FF: No, no...

EV: And then when you were appointed it caused all kinds of stuff and as I recall the issue was it's not that we don't like Felix its that you are appointing him and your not getting the recommendation of the community, is that correct?

FF: Right.

End of Side 1

FF: The protests, you know. Basically they were saying, you know, there should be an election. I guess to make their point they got to the point to say that I didn't even believe in bilingual education. And what I would say at some points, sometimes, what was it? "You know they ought to teach the kids English as soon as they can." I mean I wasn't against using Spanish but get to the English as quickly as you can. So somebody would say, "He doesn't even believe in bilingual education." So at this meeting after I was appointed there was a protest meeting. They arrived at a compromise of having an election as soon as school was out, in the summer. Because I think this was maybe in February or March, you know. I was appointed because Tina Reyes, who was the

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Hispanic on the school board...was she the only one? She might have been the only one...

EV: Ester wasn't on there?

FF: No Ester wasn't on there... Gallegos and Tina were the two Hispanics. And she had gone to school to work on her doctorate. So the community was demanding that they appoint somebody else. I mean they didn't suggest me. And there was Mike Solar, do you know Mike, the lawyer. I remember he is the one that came to me and said, "We want you to serve on the school board." And I never thought I would ever get into political or elected office. I said, "You know if you believe in education this is where you ought to be." And I talked it over with my supervisor. And he said, "Yeah it wouldn't hurt for you to be on there." So he and Vidal Martinez, do you know Vidal?

EV: Vidal is from El Paso.

FF: Is he from El Paso? I wondered where Vidal was from. They sort of put together the two others on the committee I don't know to get me on there, because they were afraid that Van or somebody else in there they would control him... I don't know so they are the ones that sort of pushed me and sponsored my...

EV: How did those guys come out of the thin air at that time?

FF: I don't know. I just knew them from... I'm trying to remember what kind of organizations that were around in Hispanic this or Hispanic that...

EV: Well we...

FF: They didn't have a chamber yet. I know that.

EV: We had the Mexican-American Bar Association and then when the young, not non-radical, because we were pretty radical, we had to be back in those days.

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FF: Yeah I know sure.

EV: But the less radical, I'll say that, young attorneys started coming up and they were already assimilating, then they wanted to have the Hispanic Bar Association - not the Mexican-American Bar Association. And that's when Solar took off with that and I don't know whether Vidal went that way or not, but Vidal was in a big firm and I'm sure they didn't want him in some radical organization like the Mexican-American Bar Association. But, and I'm just wondering if they crept out of that or if they had some other organization or something. But I just didn't know.

FF: Yeah they'll...

EV: Where did they get the wherewithal to come to you and say, "Do you want to be on the board?"

FF: Yeah.

EV: Did they have a connection with Ron Paige, did they have the connection with... he was the superintendent at the time wasn't he?

FF: No, not Paige.

EV: The chairman of HISD, no who was he, the superintendent?

FF: I'm trying to remember there was a gal...

EV: Oh that woman, verdad?

FF: Yes, Jane Raymond.

EV: Raymond.

FF: Joan Raymond...they must have gone to and said you know you ought to let this guy, he's a social worker and... you know, anybody else at the community brings to him is going to be a fighter or a rough guy or something.

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EV: Yeah well there are so many little tentacles of influence in the community... at least in Houston that I don't know sometimes you go to work here and say... well these other Mexicans came and did this already and, you know, there doesn't seem to be any kind of unified... but I'm... I don't suppose that you could have one, you know, everyone thinking the same. When you become a school board member do they give you any kind of training or sort of you just sat down and started out?

FF: No, that's it yeah.

EV: Just that right off the bat?

FF: And they did have an election that summer in August and no one ran...(laughter).

EV: After all that? There was this big scandal and nobody ran! (laughter)

FF: (laughter) And I remember there was one lady that was always really vocal and I don't remember what the occasion that she came up... something I didn't do or I didn't do right... She said, "Why are we paying him?" And they said, "This is not a paying job." She said, "Oh well let him keep it then." (laughter).

EV: (laughter) Well what were the major issues you faced back then on the school board do you remember?

FF: Its sort of, trying to get the parents involved. By then, yeah discrimination was not a big issue because...it was beginning to...

EV: When was that in the 80's.

FF: No, no in 90. I got in it in 1990.

EV: 1990?

FF: Yeah and I was just there four years and then they got me to run for City Counsel.

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EV: So the four years you were there, okay, discrimination yeah was pretty much a non issue at that point.

FF: Yeah.

EV: But we still had the big drop out rate?

FF: Oh yeah that was it. I remember I would always... at Austin High School, which was right down the street from us, I would always ask him, "When are we going to get to 400 graduates?" They would start out with 1,500 9th graders and by the time that they graduated they never graduated more that 300 and something.

EV: Mexicanos?

FF: It was basically Mexicano yeah. It was, in fact it was the largest Hispanic enrollment school, that and Milby and the drop out is one of the things that I kept asking. You know, when are we going to get kids to be reading at the grade level by 3rd grade. And they would tell me, "Well, this has got to happen or maybe it can't happen." But those, I remember there were a couple of things that I would bring up as often as I could, you know. If they could find a way to get the kids to start reading by the third grade maybe they wouldn't drop out.

EV: What about parent involvement. Do you think that is a problem?

FF: That was the other one that I kept, and even today Ernie, I feel, it's not necessarily, in inner city school it's not necessarily the parent involvement but you need that but you need involvement with people with resources. I keep hoping that maybe they could form citizen's advisory groups for the inner city schools that could help the principal, you know raise funds and everything else. You know, get the downtown

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people... they started the process of adopt, the downtown people adopting the schools or companies or something. It was good but it was more of a show thing you know.

EV: What was the the equalization of financing of schools alive at that time?

Remember they had the Edgewood School District lawsuit...

FF: Yeah.

EV: And they were supposed to equalize the funding of the schools.

FF: No, no it was okay. You know, people would call and tell me, "How come Bellaire, Lamar or Westbury have this and we don't?" And I would bring it up and says, "Bellaire, and Lamar get the same amount of money that Austin and them get, whatever they get." The difference that those guys had more is that they had the resources by citizens, in many of those cases its parents, because their parents were professional people and they had resources... So this is what even today would be a blessing if the inner city schools could have groups that provide resources like the people that provide for Bellaire and those other schools.

EV: So you are saying, you are telling me that the citizens, the parents of the kids in those schools raising those extra money for that extra supply, irrespective of the fact that the funding is equal, but the extra comes from the family?

FF: Right.

EV: So they have computers and audio visual stuff and over here we are still playing with puppets in effect right?

FF: Yeah because these parents in order to raise resources will sell popcorn and they would raise enough money to buy a record player or something. So...

EV: And over here they sell Lexus's?

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FF: So even today if there was a way the inner city schools could have people that would provide the resources of the parents of the private schools and the more advanced, more affluent neighborhoods here provide, that would be a big help to the principals.

EV: Do you think that we still maintain that same statistic of having low/high freshman classes and low graduating classes?

FF: Oh yeah. You can go to almost any high school here and look at the 9th grade and it has to be three times more that what's going to graduate.

EV: You know because we thought back then that once you get some Mexicano administrators, once we get Mexicano principals, once we get staff Mexicanos, once we get some more funding that that would save all of that but it hasn't made a dent has it?

FF: No. Because the more funding if it's public funding then it's not going to be enough. I mean the private schools they don't just live on their tuition you know.

EV: You don't mean the private schools, you are talking about the ritzy schools?

FF: Well, yeah the affluent schools... in Bellaire yeah. I mean they call it a PTA and it is parents but its parent's resources as opposed to our parents who are just barely making it you know. And they can't provide, not just financially I mean they don't have the background to be of help to the principal. And also the teachers are going to put out more where parents, they know what is going on as opposed to our parents that don't know what's going on that sort of thing, you know.

EV: Do you remember back during the de-segregation back in the 70's, early 70's when we were going under that court order and all that stuff...

FF: Sure.

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EV: And Joe Reynolds tried to break the school district apart and set up the

Westheimer School District.

FF: Yeah.

EV: And then Mario Quiñones said, "Fine you break off and we'll take the Port of Houston and that tax base (laughter) and you can have the Galleria."

FF: Yeah I remember that, that made front page news for several weeks.

EV: Yeah well that might have been almost an ideal solution wouldn't it? And to have that kind of tax base for a Mexican-American school district... You have the Port of Houston all to yourself and the chemical plants and all this other stuff.

FF: Yeah. Particularly if you could make sure the taxes stay at that level...

EV: Yeah.

FF: Instead of bringing the taxes down.

EV: But I think a lot of these... well we're getting off on something else. But I didn't know that the parent involvement made the difference in funding. I knew that it made the difference in programs in school but not in the funding of the schools.

FF: No, well I mean the public money was...

EV: No but they supplemented it right?

FF: Yeah I'm sure I mean Bellaire, or any of the affluent schools today, anywhere in the country. I mean if you are an affluent parent and you want your kid to have this or that you just call your friend you raise the money and provide it for the school.

EV: Felix what do you consider...what jewel in your crown comes from having served on HISD school board?

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FF: Oh gosh, I don't know, you know I was there four years and Ernie and the same thing happened to me at the city I get calls of just the daily problems so I... most of my effort just goes to solving the daily problems, this problem, that problem.

EV: You get your social worker mentality...

FF: You know I tell people that sitting there at the school board desk or the city hall was just like being here at Ripley people would call you... "Our street needs this," or "We don't have this." God many times I would forget where I was (laughter). The biggest, of course, change is when you are on the school board or you are on the city counsel and you have to call one of these people to report a problem when I was here at Ripley and I would call the same people to report a problem and they'd say, "We'll see if we can get to it." Or "We'll call you back." But when you are on the board or the city counsel... "Yes sir we'll take care of it." And people would tell us, you know, "We've been trying this for years and years and it's finally beginning to happen." So I don't know if I... I guess I could say I made services much more accessible to people when I was there.

EV: City services?

FF: Yeah city services and the same way with the school district. You know I was always careful, and some people accused me of some Hispanic would call me and say they would say, "They are trying to fine me or they are doing this to me," but... and I would call a director and I would tell them, "You know I'm not saying that this person is right but this is what they are saying but could you look into it?" So I never sort of advocated that they had to do what this person wanted I just said, "Can you look into it?"

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Some guy wrote a history and it said, "Fraga is one of those guys that always demanded the Hispanics get this or that..." (laughter)

EV: Stories change don't they? (laughter) Well what was the move like when you went from school board there to city counsel? Well you were at large or district?

FF: District, yeah. Well you know the difference between the two was the only thing was at the school board you got many more calls from parents specifically about a kid or a situation, much more specific than you would at the city hall. There were more calls from the parents on the school board than at city hall.

EV: Really?

FF: But at the city hall you got more calls from organizations, civic clubs and things like that. And school board was parents more specifically about their kids or their specific community.

EV: What was your years of service on the city counsel?

FF: It was from '94, six years is the term limit they have to '99, at the end of '99 I got off.

EV: Did you have something that you look back on and say, "this was..." you kind of pat yourself on the back and say, "this is okay." When you stand at the Pearly Gates with Saint Peters and he says "what did you do when you had a chance of being a city counsel man in Houston..."

FF: I gather and just basically people still to this day say, "Gosh we miss you not being there, we could call you. You never said no..." that sort of thing. And you know maybe I should have gotten more into trying to change this policy or that policy. But you know when you sort of get into a... it's a rut but I mean it's sort of what you've always

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done is answer people's calls and try to correct this one thing at a time it. Yet if you change policy I guess you can have a greater impact and I didn't get around to too much of that.

EV: I wasn't being sarcastic when I said it was your social worker mentality because that is what you do as a social worker.

FF: Yeah.

EV: You know, I did social work myself to the extent that I was a correctional officer I was a probation and parole officer. In fact I came here as a parole officer. Then I worked for HCCAA (Harris County Community Action Association) and then, when I started practicing law then my reaction became to help these people with these problems. But that's not the way you approach law. You need to have a little bit different approach.

FF: (laughter) yeah.

EV: Gee can I can I get them some this, this... So it was, I kind of had that same mentality. But I took it with me in the practice of law which was a dumb thing to do actually.

FF: You know I'm amazed at how many people, and I don't know if they are just trying to be nice...but no I think they are sincere, that I did a good job while I was there. But if you ask me, "Can you point to what policy or change you brought?" The same way the school board or this, I can't, there really wasn't, it was like, I was like, I just spent, I almost didn't sense the feeling that I was not sitting at Ripley House... it was a city council desk (laughter). And I guess somebody has to do that but the policy is what your, what really has the greater impact and the longer range impact and you know this, the city council form of government, Houston's got a weak, a strong mayor and a weak city

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counsel. So I don't know if city counsel can really do that much more. You know the mayor sets the arrangement... I was glad to let him do it, you know, he does his thing and I'll do my thing...I guess we do what's easier for us maybe and natural.

EV: Well I think people like to have responsive counsel members.

FF: No that's what I mean, I'm just amazed to today that I see people and, "Gee gosh it was great to have to there, we miss you..." And I never, I just thought that they would even forget that I was ever there because I (laughter).

EV: Now from your perspective as a social worker and school board member and city counsel, getting to the educational needs of the children at this step, which is why I want to go there... I think that we have different needs as Mexican-Americans than Central-Americans and South-Americans do. The difference attitude because, maybe there isn't... What I'm saying I guess the entitlement... excuse me the entitlement....no, the title they give us now as "Hispanics" seems to me to limit Mexican-Americans because when you start catering to that spectrum of people then you forget that Mexican-Americans, that is Mexicans who have been born and raised in the United States, have a different program, different needs than the ones who just recently immigrated here. Maybe I'm wrong...

FF: No, no...

EV: If I'm wrong let me know...but it seems to me that we are being diluted. Like yesterday they came out and said, we are numero uno in terms of population in Houston...

FF: Harris County.

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EV: Harris County, alright what does that mean? Well does that mean anything for the Mexican-Americans or is it a crown we have to share, or points...population thing we have to share with the other Hispanics? And a lot of those Hispanics that come over here don't give a darn about Mexican-Americans. I think Cubanos care, I don't care, I don't think Central-Americans care, they are very poor. The Argentines don't give a damn about anybody except Argentines. So you get all of these... except for Equator. But I don't see, I can see a lot of them the people who have the money to immigrate here are from the high classes of the countries they come from anyway, so they don't give a damn about us. Now the ones that make it here as *campesinos* [laborers], you know, workers and migrant workers, that's something else... because I think it's just an interesting city. I think somewhere those kids evolve into Chicanos or Mexican-American kids in the neighborhood. But I just think that the whole...is an interesting study I think of Mexican-Americans in encased in the Hispanic ball.

FF: No, no... I think you're right because I sometimes when I get the time to think about it I think about all these well-educated doctors and everything else that don't seem to get involved in the issues that effect all of us, Hispanics, which is the largest, what is it still 80% still Mexican-American, no?

EV: I would say, yeah that's a good... I don't know how the Hispanic numbers break down but that sounds about right.

FF: Yeah, but I... you would think they could do a lot more...overall for all of us. I mean their group, which is another country of people and Mexican-Americans, but you're right, no they don't get involved and you know I don't know if it takes away, but it doesn't help anyway.

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EV: Well the medical people you have here how many of them are Latinos?

FF: Quite a few...

EV: Doctors?

FF: Yeah there's an organization of doctors I think it's called Hispanic American Medical something and they don't go out and volunteer in the community as far as I can tell, as much as you'd like for them to do it. You know, I hope they are beginning to.

EV: Well we had, do you remember when they had that explosion in Guadalajara, the gas explosion?

FF: Yeah.

EV: There were three, maybe four doctors that I knew that were Latinos, probably Mexicanos, all practice here in Houston and they went down and got medicine, got an airplane from Continental Air Lines, all that kind of stuff but those kind of medical needs exist in Houston, Harris County, every day but where are they for that? And that's the kind of thing that we are both talking about here. And so that's one of the things I wonder, probably we need that support at that level, we always needed, Felix. When I was here in the 60's, I always marveled at the fact that the guys in the higher levels never helped us down here where we are scratching shit with the chickens, you know.

FF: Yeah. You know some of the people from the other groups the Anglos are beginning to wonder... You know before you never hear this but now you ask for help somebody, they say, "What are the Hispanic people giving you?" Or "How are they helping you?" You know and I think we're probably going to hear more of that then before which is a very legitimate thing to bring up.

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EV: Absolutely. Do you remember that speech that Bill Cosby gave to the blacks about being responsible for ourselves... got criticized for that but it's true. I mean we keep looking for somebody else to come help us and we don't do anything to help ourselves. Am I wrong?

FF: No you are right and I don't know whether since, because these guys have come, come with resources, I mean they are educated and they make it on their own and they look up on themselves but...what it takes to get them to see us as all one group? I mean maybe that's the next development that has to happen.

EV: Well I think it is probably going to start showing up first of all in voting because I don't think a lot of Hispanics are necessarily going to be looking to support Mexican-American candidates. I just don't see it happening. And I don't see it happening because of the traditional caste system that the Spanish/Mexican have had for 500 years... You know those *güeros, españoles aca arriba y los indios y mestizos aca abajo* [fair-skinned people, Spaniards up here on top and Indians and mestizos here below], I mean I think that still carries over, certainly carries over... I mean I know from practicing immigration law it carries over from the guy that I help come over here or businessmen. You know the Mexicans that come over here with money, they live in The Woodlands. They have a huge colonia in The Woodlands but I don't see them chipping in to help money for scholarships for Mexican-Americans.

FF: You know and the other thing, Ernie, I don't know whether it is because Mexico is so close that a guy that has money had to actually come over here he can travel back and forth because I notice that the professional people, doctors and everything that are in this Hispanic organization, I don't know how many they have, maybe 300, or 400... most

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of them are in the medical center, a very small percent I think are Mexican. I think they are from every other country. So the Hispanics that have means are not Mexican so...it's a situation that I think is going to have to receive more and more attention

EV: Yeah I think it's probably going to be good, like they were talking on the news last night it's probably good for the grocery stores, like Fiesta and HEB putting out more Hispanic food stuff its good business for them. But politically I think it's kind of a false statistic. I don't think it's as much giving as much power as we think it is. I mean we are going up the ladder but do you think that we'll ever see, say a president of Exxon that is Hispanic or, you now the Slumberger is not here...

FF: When it happens it will probably be someone from one of those other countries. In fact, usually the people that have a Hispanic surname up there right now are not native born I think, at least I haven't seen too many. I think the guys that are up there with Hispanic surnames came from the other countries.

EV: And I think too, I think that the Mexican-Americans, this has been my experience at the university... the Mexican-American kids who are there don't have that same fire to change the situation, I don't think. I see them maybe wanting to change an academic level and that kind of thing... But in terms of challenging the system, I don't... except for the smarts that they have, which made my heart feel good that they had for the migrant, the immigration thing they had last year...

FF: Didn't that translate into more votes?

EV: Yeah...

FF: You thought that maybe... here it is, you know.

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EV: Yeah but I don't know how that's going to go but I think that's going to be a perpetual problem because *la frontera* [the border] has moved to Houston, maybe two or three decades ago, we are a border land city now, even though we are 300 miles away...

FF: (laughter), yeah sure...

EV: Sociologically, if we start analyzing it with the sociological demographic thing and we're really the border. And so that's... okay is there anything that I haven't asked you that you maybe want to say?

FF: You know just one thing Ernie and I... if you looked into it... you know when the repatriation came it was in the early 30's, but the other day I read something that in California there was a big thing and I'm trying to remember here in Houston, because maybe because at that time we were a small Hispanic, Mexican-American population, I don't remember hearing about people from our neighborhoods having to leave. I remember just one guy that I, from one family that I heard that he was going back to Mexico. But I don't remember them, you know, getting people on busses and trains like they did in California or some place else that I read. So did that happen in El Paso or anywhere else that you know?

EV: I don't remember it happening in El Paso that was before my time...

FF: No, no I mean I was living in the early 30's I think when the Depression was at the height they wanted to start...

EV: You know I don't think it did and I'll tell you why...because I studied a program where they had, well I'll tell you the construction of the Elephant Butte Dam was a part of the Border Commission sharing the water of the Rio Grande because once that became part of the United States, New Mexico, they didn't consider at the time they signed the

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Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo about the Rio Grande water. So the Americans started hogging all the water leaving and you know how the river turns at El Paso, leaving the Mexicans without water. So they had, they started the Border Commission something like that to share the water and they had to re-do and set up all these dams between El Paso and Albuquerque the biggest one being Elephant Butte Dam. And they had, I think they had to have 50% had to be Mexican workers because of the money that was being paid out everything else. Well the Anglos resented the hell out of that and there was a lot of fights and stuff and they were, I think for that they... had something like this been going on they certainly would have picked them up and thrown them back across the river and they didn't do that. And I lived in the barrio and I don't remember anyone ever hearing or telling me about anything like that.

FF: Yeah I just vaguely remember it, people going back to Mexico...

EV: And I think it happened in LA because the Mexicanos had huge land grants which in Texas had been taken away by the Anglos after the revolution. So we didn't have anything to take away. And they were happy to have cheap labor. So I don't think...

FF: Was there an official policy of the government to...?

EV: You know I think it was official but I think it happened only in selected cities. But I would think, my first reaction would be why it would happen in LA and not here would be the Mexicanos in LA, and all, well not all but they had a lot of land out there, like they took away the land from the Japanese in World War II.

FF: Yeah in fact I think they compared to that.

EV: Yeah.

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FF: So if you run across anything that sheds a little light on that that's one thing that I've always wondered about. Just the other day there was... what was it the history of or the anniversary of it or something. But there was something in LA that I mean they were having in LA that they were looking at the situation, what took place back then...

EV: I mean there is a lot of rabid stuff that they did...

FF: Like I said I was wondering if there was any literature that it was a congress voted it on it or something, I don't know?

EV: You know I don't know. It could have been public policy, an order from the president or you know, through the state department, it could have come anywhere.

FF: I was just a baby, I must have been five or six years old I guess when people were having to go back to Mexico and there was just talk in the community and I just remember this one guy, the family, if I see his brothers I'm going to ask him. I remember the guy's name was Raymond. They said, "Raymond went back." (laughter) There was only one guy because I read that they had trains taking people back, busses...

EV: What surprises me is that the way they are able to demonize us at will. I mean you get some congressman who start saying that then the media picks it up. And now the media has to let you know whether this guy who committed this horrible offense is an illegal alien. You know, they won't say if John O'Connor was an illegal Irishman over here that committed some... But no, if it is a Mexican they are going to tell you if he is illegal or not.

This is the end of the interview.