

Socorro County Historical Society, Oral History Tapes

A.B. Baca interviewed by Manuel Padilla

My name is A. B. Baca. I was born here in Socorro. I am a nephew of the late Elfego Baca and in 1942, that last time that I seen my uncle alive - he came up to my house, and at that time he gave me his gun, a .45 Colt which I have here and his badge, and he also gave me other pictures about Socorro, and I still have those pictures in my possession. He gave them to me because he knew that he was getting old and he knew I would take care of these things. I was always pretty close to him, and when I was a young boy about 12 or 15 years old, I remember how I used to be his retriever. We'd go out hunting ducks and doves, and he' shoot some of these ducks, you know, and of course I'd go in the water and if it wasn't too deep, get 'em. I'd go out with him, quail huntin', south of Socorro - there used to be lots of quail and I would scare the quail and when they'd be on the wing or flying, he'd take a shot. He had a good liking form me and I always got along with him very well. We just went down around the Hope Farms - there used to be lots of quail and ducks in that country. In fact the first gun I ever owned - he gave it to me, a .22 single shot. He was sittin' in the park, him and some other man and I guess I was right on the corner of the Hilton Drugstore when he started waving at me and I recognized him and he came over and he said "I've got you a little present." He said be very careful, and he said one of these days we'd go out and use that gun and my gun. So that's the first gun I ever owned - a .22 single shot. I think it was a Stevens (Ed. note: probably the very popular Stevens Crackshot). *Now tell us about yourself.* Like I said I've been mining a long time - most of my mining's been underground - coal mining - Carthage coal mining up there in those mines for many many years and I had a very good mine goin' I had a good market and I had a lot of contracts. At one time I used to furnish the coal for the schools here and up in Albuquerque and then the gas come in too, and of course I lost the market. Then I went into hard rock mining and I bought me a mill which I have down south of Socorro - an ore mill, and I started mining at the Kelly Mine - the New Jersey Zinc Company. I had been pushin' that property for them and I had ---- and one of these days it would be my property. The market for ore has been bad and since 1969 I've been down in Central America - Honduras. I've been mining down there for an American company - I've done a lot of work. I drove a 600-foot tunnel - I've done a lot of stoping for them, but we didn't find enough silver ore for a mill. I came home and then I went back in 1971 and have been coming and going ever since then and doing a lot of mining for two other companies, I think. Right now the mine we were working the last time - it was a very good silver mine but it drowned out with too much water. It went too deep and the formation was mostly quicksand the big pump pumping out water were pumping out mostly sand you couldn't even timber without sinkin' in. I think they're going to get some other property, and then I'm thinking about going back in. *So you're almost like a consultant for them?* Well a consultant and then at the same time in charge of a mine - I had 204 men the last time I was workin' for this company. That's about halfway between San Pedro Azula and

(--). *Well Honduras is tropical country.* Yes, it's very humid in the north and as you start goin' south its more mountains and it's a little cooler up there - that part -the northern part where San Pedro Azula is that's the industrial city of Honduras and the elevation

there is (----) feet above sea level. *How does your experience down there compare to here?* Well, of course, it's a different thing in mining, of course. *I followed the same standard of mining, and I thought the thing to do was be sure that you start timbering right away and I always took advice from an old coal miner that was workin' for me - he used to tell me- he said if you have a bad season, make it good by timbering it and if it's good, keep it good by timberin' it too.. So I always followed his advice and I never had any trouble. You say you were involved with the Carthage mine. When did that start?* Well the mines themselves - I think they started in 1873 and that was done by the Gillilands. They used to come down there and get coals from the outcropping of the mine and take it to Ft. Craig . They used to go to Ft. Craig and there's a mine up there that was a government mine because it was the soldiers that started taking coal out at first. The native people here, they tell me that coal was a fuel bu they didn't know how to use it. But the army was stationed down here at Ft. Craig and of course they knew what it was. Afterwards, mining men came out from the east and they opened up the mines in 1873. *The Indians didn't use the coal at all? Or the Hispano?* No, they didn't know what it was. *Wood was what they burned.* I have some records of 1873. The old commissary - some of these miners would take out some groceries on credit and the bills were dated 1873 - in fact I still have some of that token money. Carthage made it's own money and when the miners came around and wanted credit they'd get some of those little chips, you know, and they were good in the store there - even in San Antonio where Conrad Hilton was raised. *Wasn't San Antonio almost the center for that area?* Yes. It was a railroad junction, and years afterward, you know, they built a spur to Carthage, and it used to be called New Mexico Midland. I think I have pictures of that locomotive in my house. I have a picture where it was derailed on account of a bridge at the mine and they had a roundhouse there just about a quarter of a mile from the main track . *But that only existed to haul the coal?* Well, it was used to haul down the coal cars to San Antonio and that was the main track and the freight train would pick 'em up there at San Antonio and take 'em to different places like El Paso was a big consumer - all they way down in El Paso was the smelter. *El Paso was the direction for a lot of the smelting?* Before that, they had some coking ovens down at San Antonio - there are the old foundations of the coking ovens, and they used to bring down the coal. I think they had about 27 coking ovens there. *You could still see the coke from the old beehive ovens. The coking ovens are on the property - I think it belongs to Mr. Bursum now - but it's southwest of San Antonio. Well tell me about the screens - you know, the size - and that's what left up there - very good coke. The coal areas are getting renewed interest because of the petroleum.* Well, yes there is a lot of coal up at Carthage, but it will never be strip mining and that's what they are looking for - the Peabody Coal Company had an option with me at one time, and they come in they drilled the property - I think about four (----) and said it would be too expensive. See the coal down there - when they opened up the new mine in Carthage in 1946 I think. I hit coal about 180 feet from the surface and the seam's pitchin' to the northwest about four or five degrees and it's gettin' deeper and deeper. So it couldn't be stripped. *There's pretty much reactions to strip mining now, too isn't there? Pressures, environment, things like this?* Well I think its like the strip they're building up in the Navajo country and they're talking about stripping it and it's so shallow, and they need so much of it - with underground mining they would never get that kind of tonnage and it would be risky, very dangerous, to hold up the seam because

the matrix of the country above the coal - it's all decomposed. It would be very, very expensive to try to mine coal - the only way you can do it is by stripping. And I seen some of the country up there that they stripped and then they leveled the surface to kind of fix up the ground which is a good thing to do an nothing grows back in but these tumbleweeds and wild plants that's not good for nothin' else but just a few goats. *You mentioned Hilton and San Antonio, do you have any recollections of Conrad Hilton?* I have seen him about three times - I don't know him very well - I'm not well acquainted with Conrad Hilton, but I know - I've heard lots of stories about him - very good stories - he was familiar with San Antonio and he got along pretty good with the people down there. *He had something to do with the railroad too, wasn't it?* His father owned the Hilton Coal Mines and I think - I'm pretty sure that old man Hilton - that's Connie's father - was an uncle of old man Bursum - Senator Bursum and that's Holm Bursum's father. In fact he brought old man Bursum to Socorro. When he was a kid about twelve or thirteen years old - and of course old man Bursum stayed here all his life and got to be elected Senator one time. My uncle tells me a story one time which I'll tell ya - there's a Judge Green here - I have a picture of Judge Green and my father and so on and he as famous around here - the Judge - and he used to own the place that's known now as the Capitol Bar down there. Down in the basement he had his bar and a lot of stuff down in there so one time my uncle went down in the basement to see Judge Green - he had some business with him because my uncle was District Attorney at one time and he come in and Judge Green said, "Ha ha, you're just the man we been waitin' for we need a witness. This man here wants to get married - a tall lanky cowboy - they thought he was seven feet tall - so my uncle says OK I'll be your witness and so on, so the marriage was performed and this tall lanky cowboy - of course he had one or two things to drink. You know he was kind of staggerin' here and staggerin' there and he reached in his pocket and he asked, "Judge how much do I owe you for your service?" And the Judge said, "Oh, I don't have no fixed fee - you can pay me according to how pretty the bride is." So he reached in his pocket and pulled out some small change and handed it to the judge. The cowpuncher said, "Here, that's your pay." And the judge said, "Just a minute." He ran over to the cash register and he gave him a nickel change. Another case about my uncle- he was Sheriff and some prisoners had escaped from jail - I think there were two prisoners - and my uncle was in town and the jailer was all excited because these prisoners got away from him and he was certainly hopeful that they wouldn't (---) - so my uncle said, "You know Ramon, you and the deputy go out and you don't have to bring both of them in at the same time. Just bring one of them in - if you catch one of them just bring them in and I want to talk to them." They caught one of them - I think it was at San Acacia north of Socorro, and my uncle stopped and started talkin' to the prisoner and this prisoner says he don't know nothin' about where his partner was so my uncle said, "I'm gonna make you a bet - ten dollars - that you are going to go down and catch your partner. If you don't I'm going to take it out on you." This prisoner was ready to leave and he got on the horse and my uncle took him by the Court House there and you know he's standing there and this guy that was in jail he said, "How do you know I'm coming back Mr. Baca?" And my uncle said "Oh I know you'll come back. If you don't I'll bring you in myself table fork?." That means dead or alive - (table fork) so he brought his partner in. About another time that my uncle went against his wife because his wife was very young - she must have been about twenty years younger than he was and my uncle he was too strict

with his children - his boy and daughter - sometimes they'd do something he didn't approve and his wife would always take the side of the children even if they were in the wrong and they used to have some arguments that way, you know, and she'd get mad and she'd go to San Francisco because they had an apartment house up there. He'd bring her back again from California. So that's the way he used to have quarrels with this wife all the time. One time he put his own boy, George, in jail - in 1917 there was flu goin' around and the jailer got sick - and of course they substituted his boy, George, for jailer, and my uncle wasn't here in Socorro, he was in El Paso, and they had a prisoner I there that - this George didn't like and then George wouldn't give him food on a plate, he'd throw it on the floor. Of course, this prisoner wouldn't eat it, and then when my uncle got back from El Paso, this prisoner in the county jail, he sent work to my uncle that he wanted to talk to him, so my uncle came over and the first thing he seen was the food and my uncle asked him, "what's the matter? Don't you like our food around here?" and this prisoner in that cell, he said, "I don't like it Mr. Baca. It's the way it's handed to me by your boy. It's not even handed to me it's thrown right there on the floor as you can see, and your boy told me when I get pretty hungry, I'll eat it." So myuncle didn't say anything, he went up to his office and he sent for his deputy to make a commission for that guy in the jail and the deputy said, "Are you crazy? Are you going to make that guy a deputy?" He said, "I have a special assignment for him." So they got this prisoner up from the cell and my uncle saw him and make him a deputy and handed him a double barreled shotgun and a badge, and he said to the deputy - he used to keep the books there - "I want you to get out an order for arrest of George." And, by golly, he wrote it out. "And you go bring my boy here dead or alive." And he found him playing pool downtown and brought him in and when he brought him in he called Judge Green and he told him what the trouble was and he wanted the Judge to give George, his boy, hard labor workin' around the streets and by golly he worked every day cleanin' the streets and cutin' weeds and everything else and this prisoner tried to shoot him - he tried to get away, but he put his own boy in jail. *Boy, that's really something.* My uncle said he was tired of telling his boy, you know, if he was bad and didn't obey him, he'd have to learn the hard way. *Yeah, well he sounds like he was a very strict sheriff.* Well, he wasn't exactly strict. If somebody broke the law the first time, he'd have such a good psychological case that he wold give him a second chance and help him out. A lot of people would get in trouble with the law, and then they would get in trouble again. These people that keep on breakin' the law, they's chronic law violators. He didn't have much patience with those. Like his boy - like he said I'm tired of trying to be nice to my boy, he don't listen to me and he got to learn the hard way. Sure enough he had him arrested. *Did Elfego Baca ever talk about the big shootout in Reserve?* Oh yes, he told me - I asked him one time - I asked him how many shots was fired and you didn't get hit? Well, he said that little shack didn't have no have no (---) doors and he (----). (dug a foxhole?) And I was just playin' possum , playin' dead most of the time just hoping and praying that help would come. He said he used to fool these guys by playin' possum and he wouldn't fire back unless he really had to. *I see you have the script of this play.* That was written by Walt Disney - it was being shown. (Looking at pictures) He was dressed like a Duke, you know and he was a very tough guy. This guy Jose Salazar was taken captive by the American troops - I think in the battleground? of Texas and he was sentenced to be shot and my uncle knew A. B. Fall - they were very good friends and he knew Vice President

Curtis. *Fall was Secretary of State?* Yes, and my uncle had him on the telephone with Senator, then Curtis, - Vice President or something and told him about this General Salazar wouldn't let nobody consult with him. So Pancho Villa hired my uncle as an attorney and they had Salazar here in the Albuquerque jail and my uncle got a postponement, delaying the execution and then this General Salazar he broke jail, he got out and my uncle told me that this general spent about fifteen days in hiding on some of these ranches out here and he wouldn't go into Mexico because things were looking pretty bad for Pancho Villa down there and he was one of Pancho Villa's generals. He couldn't get in until contact was made with somebody on this side to get him across. So some of the folks of this general Salazar they lived in Columbus in New Mexico. See he was from Paloma - this General Salazar. *Did this have anything to do with the Columbus ---?* No, that was before Columbus. The Pancho Villa I think he went on the rampage two times. *Across the border?* No, he started two revolutions - he overthrew the (---) government. He put in Madero as President and he was assassinated and he goes over to a second revolution again and then the second revolution when they claimed Pancho Villa came into Columbus. Salazar was during the first revolution. *What happened to him, actually?* They killed him. They assassinated him, he didn't stay too long - I think it was a few weeks after he got in. *It would have been much better for him to stay here in jail.* Well people would rather take the chance, I guess. He had some friends up there - of course he had enemies too. *Yeah, I didn't know Elfego Baca was involved with ---.* He was an attorney for Pancho Villa and the Mexican money was no good and they used to send some valuables like gold and stuff like that to my uncle to buy ammunition and supplies for the revolution. I have an old watch that my uncle gave me - this gold piece here, he gave it to me too - I forgot to mention it. That goes back to the Mexican revolution. And it was during the Mexican revolution that he killed this guy, Otero, down in El Paso. Here's how it happened. Otero was a contact man between my uncle and Pancho Villa. Pancho Villa was in Juarez, Mexico, and he had captured Juarez.. And he would send some money to El Paso where my uncle was. He couldn't go into Juarez, but my uncle had his headquarters in El Paso. So all these valuables, gold and American money that was used to purchase goods on this side had to be delivered to my uncle in El Paso. Well this Faustino? Otero sent word to my uncle to meet him at the same place - that's the street down by the bridge where there's railroad square. That's where they used to meet across the river. And my uncle was always suspicious of this Otero - he thought he was a little sneaky - he didn't trust him too good. So this night that he shot him, Otero said, "Here I have forty thousand dollars in American money from Pancho Villa." He said, "OK. sign this receipt so I can take it to Pancho Villa, Pancho Villa demands receipts, you know." He signed the receipt. When my uncle signed the receipt he made up a (---) to give him a card - another companion whose name was Dr. Romero. Of course he was from Mexico. He was a very famous doctor in El Paso and they were driving a little (--) car, my uncle told me. This car was about forty feet from where my uncle received the money - as my uncle turned away to go bring the car he heard the click of a gun. It didn't go off when it clicked the first time - it was an automatic - and he clicked it again - it was a .25 caliber - and it hit him on the bottom of the coat. My uncle shot him twice and killed Otero. The rest of it is a matter of record in the Court House in El Paso. He shot him in self defense. He (Otero) made a mistake - tricked him, and then it didn't go off and then he went to get the cartridge in there but it

was too late. He shot him twice, right on the left side with a .45 pistol. *Did that have any effect on the relations between Baca and Villa?* No, I don't think so. My uncle didn't say so. Villa was - this was the in-between contact man that always used to bring money and deliver the messages all the time. My uncle said he never trusted him too much. *What did you think of the movies that they do on ---?* The actor didn't look like my uncle at all. The old statue of the old Virgin was in Magdalena. Have you ever been down there? At the basement in Magdalena? The statue of the Virgin that was about five feet six inches tall. That was I the shack when my uncle fought these cowboys. It's in the Catholic Church down in the basement. It belonged to the Armijo family. An old Spanish family,

Armijo. (---) was an heir to that statue, that Virgin and he gave it to my uncle and my uncle gave it back to the Armijo family and then the family gave it back to Magdalene - the Catholic Church down there. *How does it happen to be in that place ---?* Well his lady, Mrs. Armijo, she was a very Catholic lady and she had an altar with this Virgin, you know, it had been in the family a long time. I think they brought it in from Mexico or Spain and she put it that little shack and my uncle was dodgin' bullets, you know, and it was the closest thing he could come to in this shack was this lady and this statue. He told her she could get out and he stayed in there himself. This statue was not hit at all. My uncle and the statue was not hit. This was a big statue as big as a man - a good size statue. It's a miracle it wasn't hit. My uncle was raised as an orphan - yeah - he came from Topeka, Kansas. He and Steve Baca used to run a grocery store. And my uncle could talk a little Spanish - not too much - but he could talk better English and I have been told that when he met Vice President Curtis back in Topeka, Kansas that my uncle was an orphan. When he come to live with his uncle he was about 15 or 16 years old. He was workin' for his uncle at the store and later on he got in trouble with these cowboys out west. *Was he ranching out there?* No, he had a ----- . He heard how these cowpunchers was shooting up the town and everything else and he started lookin' for the Justice of the Peace. Justice of the Peace, Milligan, who wouldn't even touch it. He was afraid of the cowboys. Then my uncle went out to arrest these cowpunchers and that started the whole thing. *He wasn't afraid of them?* No, he was kind of a funny man to me - I knew him very well - and that man, my uncle when sometimes people would die out here in Socorro and they had the body out there - you know they didn't have those morgues - you know how women cry - well he'd be among the women crying just like a woman. I saw him one time - you sound like a thrown (bull) you drown out all the ladies Anything would make him cry and he liked animals - horses - and kids. He liked kids. When someone would mistreat a horse or mistreat a woman he would always help them out. I have a letter at the house that was written by a lady from Texas two years ago. She finally located me and I wish I had brought it over. In this letter she says that my mother used to work for the old Windsor Hotel, the old Windsor Hotel that used to be down where the Socorro Drug is now. (Ed. note: not an accurate location) And they were very, very poor. And at the old Windsor Hotel they had a dining room and they had a piano and this lady said she was a girl of about 7 or 8 years old then, and when there was nobody around she would sneak in the back and play the piano. She said she had been in there so many times that she was learning how to play the piano and one time she looked back, and there was a man standing there with a moustache and lookin' at her and she started to run away. This man said, "Little girl, don't run away. I want to talk to you.

You play pretty good. Come back here and play some more for me." The little girl said that's not my piano, an my uncle said, "That's all right, come over here and play for me." She played the piano and my uncle said, "Would you like to take music lessons?" She said she can't because we're too poor, I don't have no shoes to go to school. "He said, well you come and see me a while so her mother came over and he gave her money to hire music lessons, and this girl she's a composer now. I got the letter at the house - I'll bring it over. *Did you say she's composing classical music? Does she say that she owes everything to Eelfego Baca - I's so nice that he gave her her frsrt start in music.* I got the letter that she wrote to me. She said she's trying to get a nice story in that book on my uncle, you know, Seven Lives, I mean Law and Order Limited by Krischov, I think it is. I told her where she could get a book and she said she did and she's read it over and over again. Her name is Betty Dunn, She's an old lady now. *What do you think of the changes in Socorro and stuff like this?* I was born here in Socorro. Well, there's been a big change - lots of ways it's been changing - all the streets - the people have changed. Well, you can't believe that it's the same Socorro from 34 years ago. *I guess every thing was centered around the plaza and in those days it was pretty rough to make a living.* People would say they could live off of farming. *Yes, farming was bigger, wasn't it .* People that lived here took more part in farming - I remember they had their gardens in the back of the house and they raised (---) most of the year. Other people had more acreage where they done more farming and that's the way it was. *There was some pretty big fruit orchards around?* Yeah, apple orchards and peach orchards but they're gone now. *You went to school here? What were some of the big incidents - did anything stand out from those times? Like in grade school or elementary school?* I would say we were a bunch of kids up to some mischief or something. *What did kids do for stunts?* Well, we used to have a big old heater and there are still on or two boys around here that were in school with me. We had a teacher, her name was Ms. Kennedy - she was deaf, awful deaf and she used to stand outside for recess, you know, she used to stand outside and watch the boys get in line and there was one boy that was always full of the devil he had some of this red powdered chiles so he'd march up to the second story building that was the schoolhouse and we'd march around inside the school room and each one takes a seat and unfortunately he'd throw a handful of that chile in the stove and all that chile in there burnin' - whenever you wanted to quit school for the day, that's one way of doing it. Seems like one time we had a skunk, you know, and we took him over to the school house and we put him inside the teacher's desk and boy it stunk the school up all week. *We were doing some mining up there in Kelly. Did you have any interest up there when kelly was a bigger center of mining?* No, I took over the Kelly mine in '65 when the market for coal started gettin' bad and that Kelly mine was in shambles - in fact the New jersey Zinc Company had been thinking about getting a bulldozer to close up the mine, and I came around and they started giving me a mining lease so I proved it up with the State Mine Inspector and the insurance companies. I reactivatd the mine and it's a pretty good piece of property. I found some pretty good zinc ore in there and lead carbonates which accompany it. They were not aware that it was there. Of course it's still there, but the market's pretty bad for the day and one bad thing now there's no place to ship your ores. Your sulfide ores which is zinc and lead - the El Paso smelter they'll take your ore but they won't pay for any zinc so you don't come out money ahead so I don't know what's going to happen. The closest market I know is up in Houston but that's too far -

the freight's too high to ship your ore up there. I think the mining days of the Kelly District are about over unless they put a smelter somewhere so a guy can ship their sulfides. *Some of those kids claim they can make a few dollars a day by picking up smithsonite.* It's very dangerous to go in that mine there and I have insurance covering the whole mine, you know, personal property, bodily injury, but somebody is going to get hurt some day. It's an old mine and it's not a very good solid condition - it's very, very fractured all over. The smithsonite is the most dangerous part of the mine, too. You have to crawl on your belly. It's only about 14 inches high - you have to crawl on your belly to get into the working places. *Thank you very much Mr. Baca.*