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Interview no. 217.2

Judge George Rodríguez, Jr.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Judge George Rodríguez, Jr. (1936-)
INTERVIEWER: John C. Tuer
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 12, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 217B
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 217B
TRANSCRIBER: John C. Tuer
DATE TRANSCRIBED: April 12, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former Municipal Court Judge; current El Paso County Attorney.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; Mexican aliens in El Paso in relation to crime; ethnic relations; views on the Chicano Movement.

**See also No. 412.

15 minutes.
7 pages.

[Interview with George Rodríguez, Jr., by John C. Tuer on April 8, 1976. Class project for History 3390, The U.S.-México Border Since 1848, at U.T. El Paso.]

T: The next gentleman that I will be interviewing (also in reference to the U.S.-México border and in particular the twin-city complex on the border) is George Rodríguez, Jr., the County Attorney for the County of El Paso. George has been working in the County Attorney's office for quite some time, and he is now the head man here. He has a wealth of information, so rather than me taking up all the time, I will ask Mr. Rodríguez to give us a little information on his background as to his family, where he was born, and bring us up to date to his present position as County Attorney.

R: I was born here in El Paso. My father was born in Washington, D.C.; my mother was born in Torreón, México. My father is a lawyer. My grandfather was attaché from México to the United States and that is why my father was born in Washington, D.C. After leaving D.C., my grandparents went to San Francisco. Later [they] wound up here in El Paso because my father was an asthematic, and in those days, people came to El Paso and the Southwest for the climate. My grandfather was a Federal District Court Judge in México and Juárez, state of Chihuahua. My father has been a practicing attorney in this community for some forty years. He has been County Court at Law Judge; he is now the District Court Judge for the 168th District Court. He was District Attorney. My dad was also Assistant City Attorney. I went to school in El Paso, Austin High School. I went to the University of Texas at El Paso; I went to the University of Houston Law School, [and] graduated from the South Texas College of Law in Houston. I have been practicing for eleven years. I also sat on the bench as Municipal Court Judge for some five years.

I was appointed to the County Attorney's position in 1971, was elected in 1972, was unopposed in 1976, and will be in this position, God willing, until 1980.

T: Great. As present County Attorney, George, and as a former Municipal Court Judge (and being in the legal profession all these years), you have, I am sure, come in contact with a number of undesirable as well as desirable elements-- I am referring to the people from across the border. I am sure that you get a lot of these misdemeanor cases brought to your attention. In the years that you have been in this type of business, has there been an increase in misdemeanors from the aliens, both legal and illegal? What seems to be the trend here in El Paso toward the increase in crime, as far as your office is concerned?

R: John, let me say this: I don't believe there is an increase as far as aliens doing, let's say, misdemeanor cases, or more coming into the United States. Crime is on the rise in the United States for a number of reasons. Number one, we have more of a population. Number two, we are in what they call an inflation, and then also a depression or recession, all together. If you look back into history, in the 1930's the increase in crime went up tremendously. That's because people are hungry; that's when people are out of work, and they just get into more mischief. The reason there is more focus now on the rise of crime is because there are just more people in the United States, more people in this community. Juárez, since the 1930's, has tripled and so has El Paso; we are just a bigger city. As far as misdemeanor cases, I don't think it has increased; I think it is in just the same proportion that it was, say 10 years ago; it's just that crime is on the rise. Yes,

we do have a situation here where we have aliens that do get arrested for misdemeanor cases; they are not the greater majority of our cases. In the Juvenile field, that has increased in the glue sniffing. And of course, in South El Paso we have a situation where aliens rob, steal, and do a lot of mischief, and they run back across the border. That probably is on the increase, and that is because of the situation that people are just looking for places to eat [and] sleep. That's why you have your mischief crimes and thefts. But as a whole, I do not believe crime has increased. We do have more of the alien crimes here because of the border, but they are so interrelated that I just cannot say they have increased.

T: Okay, I've got two more questions, George. This one is on the racial issue. Living here as you have for these many years and being in the unique situation that El Paso and Juárez are--being by far the largest twin cities on the border--do you think the racial issue here (and I am speaking, of course, of the Mexican American, Anglo, and the Black) has been something to be concerned about? Do you think it is far less in proportion to other border cities or even other cities throughout the United States? How do you think our racial issue is? Are we co-existent or is there much tension between the ethnic groups here?

R: John, I personally believe that we are far ahead of all the major cities in the United States, as far as the ethnic groups are concerned. When you talk about the Mexicans and the Anglos here in El Paso, I don't think that we've really had that many problems like other parts of the country. But for me to say that we've never had any problems, of course, I'd be lying. Yes, we have had some problems, but I think that they

were ironed out in the '30s. In the '40s we took great steps as far as a minority group coming up. Then just looking at what we have (such as elected officials and the success of the business men here on the border), I think that we are far ahead of the entire United States; and we don't have that many problems now. We always have some isolated cases where we do have some problems in the ethnic groups, but they are so insignificant that I don't think they really have that much bearing.

T: Okay, George one last question; this is quite an important question, especially today. This is in regards to the Chicano Movement. I would like for you to give me your personal opinions and beliefs toward the movement itself. Has it helped the Mexican American or has it hurt them politically, legally, and socially? In a few words, can you tell us how you feel about the Chicano Movement?

R: The Chicano Movement, I think, has already peaked itself; it's on the downtrend. If you had to make a scale, I think you would find that it peaked about five years ago. At that time, you had Corky Gonzales out of Denver, you had the so called radicals, and you had the great gentleman from California, César Chávez. They have all peaked, and I think they have accomplished what they wanted to accomplish. They took great steps, and I think they did a very fine job. Whether [or not] I agree on how they did their movement, I've never really examined myself on that, because it came so fast here in El Paso. It was a very...I think it lasted probably a year and a half, and that's all it did last here. I think it helped to some extent; I think it hurt a little bit too. I think that when you look at any of these type [of] things, when you have a movement, everything helps, but then you also

have some hurt. Anytime you do have change, why, it's probably for the good; but then on the way [to] the change, you do hurt some individuals. The Chicano Movement was good for the community; it did a lot for the community, but it also hurt the community in some areas. I was involved in some cases where we had some riots and everything; we had to arrest some people. Those are the unfortunate incidents, and that does occur. And because of those arrests, you had some people that said, "These are nothing but hooligans or radicals that don't know what they are doing," and this is where it really hurts. Overall the Chicano Movement has helped, but it's on the downfall. I don't think it's necessary anymore. It has accomplished great steps because of your EEOC and your implementation of scholarships to Mexicans who are poor--now they have the opportunity to go to school--so the avenues are all open. Around here, I think it is basically a dead movement.

T: George, do you think that here there may have been an attempt on the part of the youth for self recognition and leadership? [It] seems to me that most of these movements are either backed or controlled by the youth. Most of the active ones or restless ones are the youth. In the back of my mind, it seems that what the youth are trying to do is get recognition through the Chicano Movement itself, particularly here in our own city, in the barrio. In the Segundo Barrio, we have hundreds of teenagers down there that have potential but no leadership. What do you think about this? Maybe this is an attempt on their part to try and get recognition and gain some leadership.

R: John, I think it is true with most of these young kids. What happens is, it's just a perfect time in their lives [where] they can do something

and get a little recognition, get something they never did have. If I would have had the opportunity in my young life--we didn't have any movements--I probably would have been one of the marchers. They are not marching so much for a cause, I think, but rather [because] it's a lot of fun to march; that's what they do. It is a youth movement. If you can recall, in the last five years, all the people that were in the movement are now back into hiding and their normal life is going on; and they are not as radical, if that is what you want to call them, as they were. It's just youth, it's a lot of fun, and they do it for lack of something better to do. They don't have any jobs, and it is just fun.

T: This is the last question, George. Being that El Paso and Juárez are situated as they are in this unique [location], how do you think the economies of the twin cities here, particularly El Paso, compare with the rest of the country, and why?

R: Well, I think our economy is very good. Of course, our unemployment is always high; it has always been the highest. This is nothing new. It has nothing to do with the recession. Our economy is good. The prime example is downtown. El Paso is one of the largest cities, we are the fifth largest in the state of Texas, and the downtown area is not dead. [If] you go to Houston, Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, [you will find that] their downtown areas are completely dead. Ours is alive because of the situation of México being situated next door and the people coming to buy here. So economy-wise, we get a lot more out of México than México receives from us.

T: Thank you, George. That is all of the questions that I have on this.

The main points of interest that you have expressed were what I was looking for. For anyone that is listening to this recording, this is not a preplanned interview. In fact, I didn't even tell George what we were going to talk about. I wanted it to be "off the cuff" and instantaneous responses [which] is what we need and would be most valid in a case like this. These recordings, of course, will go on file at the University in the Oral History Department for future references to anyone checking on the border situation. George, thanks a lot. I am very grateful to you for taking your time, because I know how busy you are. Even the few minutes [that] we got on this tape are very valuable. We do appreciate it. Now you know you are recorded for posterity.

R: Thank you.