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Interview no. 177

Judge George Rodríguez, Sr.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Judge George Rodríguez, Sr.
INTERVIEWER: Richard Estrada
PROJECT: Bicentennial
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 29, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 177
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 177
TRANSCRIBER: Rhonda Hartman
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Judge of 168th District Court in El Paso.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; El Paso in the 1920's and 1930's; Mexican Americans in El Paso; Mexican American politicians in Texas; prominent Mexican Americans in El Paso, past and present.

45 minutes.
23 pages.

BICENTENNIAL

E: This interview is being conducted in El Paso, Texas, on July 29th, 1975. The subject of the interview is Judge George Rodríguez, Sr. of El Paso. Judge Rodríguez, where were you born, sir?

R: I was born in Washington D. C.

E: In what year, sir?

R: January 20th, 1909.

E: Could you tell me something about your parents, Judge? Their background?

R: My father was attorney. He was a judge in Ciudad Juárez. He was chargé d'affaires for the Nicaraguan government in Washington D. C. He was the Nicaraguan Consul in San Francisco, California. My mother is named Alejandra Douglas. Her father was an engineer on the west coast of México. He helped build the Southern Pacific there and owned a railroad and navigation company. That's about it.

E: Could you tell me where your father was born and when?

R: I don't know the date, but he was born in Nicaragua.

E: In what city?

R: In Otepi.

E: How did he get to north México and El Paso?

R: He was Consul in San Francisco, and then he went as a diplomat to

Washington, D. C. Then we came to El Paso.

E: Do you come from a large family, Judge?

R: Four children in our family.

E: Were they younger or older than yourself?

R: I'm the oldest.

E: Could you tell me what your brothers and sisters do?

R: My brother is a dentist in Dallas, Texas--a retired Army Colonel, graduate of Baylor, fairly prominent in Dallas civic affairs. He was secretary to the National Dental Association. My sister's a teacher in Dallas. My youngest brother is Purchasing Agent for General Motors Corporation in México City.

E: Could you tell me something about your schooling?

R: I attended public schools in El Paso, Texas--Lamar, Morehead, Bailey, El Paso High. I took my pre-legal training at St. Mary University in San Antonio. Then I attended the University of Arizona at Tucson where I received my Bachelor of Laws degree.

E: When did you receive your Bachelor of Laws degree?

R: 1933.

E: Judge, while you were growing up in El Paso, can you recall any teachers in school who may have had a particular influence on your life while

you were growing up?

R: Yes. I remember a few.

E: Could you name them and tell me something about them?

R: Mrs. Fleck. The thing I remember about her most--she was beautiful. Mrs. Bartholomew, she was my Math teacher; Mrs. Burgess taught me English in high school; Mrs. Maud Issacs who later was State Representative legislator. Mrs. Price; Dr. Jones was principal at high school; and a few others, but I can't recall their names at this time.

E: Of course, you're of Nicaraguan descent, Judge...

R: No, not necessarily. My father was the only one. My mother's part English and part Mexican.

E: Could you tell me where she was from?

R: She was from the state of Sinaloa.

E: Perhaps you could delve into her background a little more. Was her father from England?

R: No, I think he was born in México, but he was of English parentage.

E: What was his name?

R: Douglas.

E: Well, then, you're part Nicaraguan and part Mexican, and there's some

English thrown in there.

R: That's right.

E: Were you identified with the Mexican element in school when you were growing up?

R: I never noticed it.

E: Did you ever experience any discrimination while you were growing up in El Paso?

R: Not as a child, but in my teenage days, yes.

E: Could you elaborate on that?

R: Not any particular incidences but just general discrimination.

E: Would you say that was prevalent throughout El Paso?

R: I would say so.

E: What kind of jobs did you have while you were growing up, Judge?

R: I worked for Bailey-Mora Customs Broker; I shined shoes; I delivered papers; I worked with Tri-State Motor Company; I worked with the Pacific Fruit Express; painting; odd jobs, mowing lawns.

E: In your early years in El Paso did you ever know Frank and/or Ike Alderete?

R: Yes, I knew them well.

E: Could you tell me something about them? What kind of business were they in, for instance?

R: They were prominent in Ysleta.

E: Did you ever know anything about their political activities in El Paso?

R: They were prominent politically.

E: In what respect?

R: They wielded quite an influence.

E: Did they wield influence over the Mexican community?

R: Yes.

E: What part of town principally?

R: The Lower Valley.

E: Any in Little Chihuahua in South El Paso?

R: That was Domingo Montoya. He was the prominent one.

E: What other prominent políticos were there at that time of Mexican descent?

R: There were many.

E: Could you name a few?

R: Domingo Montoya, Ike Alderete, Elizario Montes, Juan Escontrías and his family; the Apodacas in Socorro. There were many that were very prominent, besides some Anglos that were prominent in influencing the Mexican people, like Joe Dunn. He was known as the Mayor of East

El Paso, probably the strongest political figure that I can remember.

E: While you were growing up in El Paso say in the '20s, did you ever know S. L. A. Marshall, Sam Marshall?

R: I don't remember the name.

E: With regard to the illegal buying of Mexican voters so that they could go to the polls and such, did much of that go on here in El Paso?

R: Yes, yes.

E: Could you describe how this was done?

R: They mutilated voters and jammed the ballot boxes, revoted people once or twice. It was generally corrupt.

E: Would they ever import Juarenses to vote over here?

R: That's what I understand.

E: Would they pay them?

R: I don't know about monetarily, but they'd buy them food, give them beer, pay the poll taxes; that was prevalent.

E: Did it go until recent times?

R: I think probably it terminated in the '30s.

E: What year did you go off to Law School?

R: 1929.

E: The Depression was just about setting in, is that right?

R: I went through it all.

E: Could you give me your recollections about your youth during Depression? What were you doing? Did you have any other jobs in order to go to Law School?

R: I had odd jobs in Tucson, not to amount to anything though. But I caught the Depression when I started practicing law. They were hard times.

E: What kind of clients did you have? What kind of business did you engage in?

R: The poorest clients--a lot of criminal law.

E: Theft, that kind of thing?

R: Yes, all general practice.

E: While you were going to Law School at the University of Arizona, did you ever encounter any discrimination there?

R: Not that I noticed personally.

E: Did you ever witness any against any of your fellow students?

R: Yes. For example, Mexicans couldn't belong to a fraternity or a sorority.

That was the main bone of contention in those days. That was obvious.

E: Judge, in looking at you, you're a rather fair-skinned individual.

Unless one knew your surname, one probably wouldn't suspect that you were of Latin descent. Have you ever given thought to the fact that perhaps darker skinned "latinos" encounter more discrimination than lighter skinned "latinos"? Is there any validity to that?

R: Yes, because it happens in the Black race. They criticize the ones that are darker amongst themselves.

E: So you would say that's true amongst the Mexicans too?

R: I would kind of judge so, yes.

E: You said that you practiced law here in El Paso after you got out of Law School, is that right?

R: That's right.

E: After you got out of Law School and you started [practicing] law, what was the first big break that you had that lead toward your success?

R: Mayor Marvin Harlan broke the ice here and beat the Establishment. He gave me a break; he made me Assistant City Attorney which helped me during the Depression.

E: What year was this, sir?

R: 1937. And Mayor Duke helped me.

E: At this time, how many Mexican Americans were employed in City Government? Were there many?

R: Considerably.

E: Of course, you have lived in San Antonio...

R: Only in school.

E: ...in Tucson and El Paso, and all three of them have substantial Mexican American communities.

R: That is correct.

E: In reflecting on your years in those cities--of course, you're more familiar with El Paso--could you make any statements about the way Mexican Americans are treated, relatively speaking, in each of those communities?

R: Well, I can only speak for myself. I was always treated very well. But I do know that others have been mistreated. You can't help but notice it.

E: Would you say that you were treated as well in San Antonio as you were in El Paso? As well in Tucson as you were in El Paso?

R: Probably.

E: Judge, in all your years in El Paso, do you think that generally speaking the law has treated individuals fairly regardless of ethnic origin?

R: Not completely.

E: Do you think there has been some discrimination?

R: Yes.

E: Has this mostly been against Mexican Americans?

R: Yes--and Blacks.

E: Could you tell me about discrimination against Blacks in El Paso? Do you have any specific recollections?

R: Well, in my younger days they couldn't come north of San Antonio Street; they couldn't attend the church; they weren't permitted to go into public eating places; they weren't permitted to attend school, except in their own; they weren't permitted to ride trains; they weren't permitted to go to the picture show. Such things.

E: How did Mexicans and Blacks get along, say, during the '20s and '30s?

R: Not very well. Mexicans have always discriminated against Blacks and vice versa.

E: Blacks have discriminated against Mexican Americans?

R: Yes, sir.

E: How did this manifest itself? Did they live in certain areas of town?

R: That's primarily one of the reasons, yes. The biggest fault is that the Mexican Americans and the Blacks always segregated themselves.

E: They tend to stick together?

R: Yes.

E: Could you tell me what areas of town the Blacks lived in?

R: East El Paso.

E: And the Mexicans?

R: South El Paso and the Valley.

E: Would it be fair to say that most of the inhabitants of the area south of San Antonio Street during the '20s and '30s were almost exclusively Mexican American?

R: I would say so.

E: Judge, I'd like to ask you a question that you might want to take a little time to reflect on. Historians have had a difficult time in finding out whether or not there was such an image--a self-image--of a Mexican American during the 1920s. Do you think people of Mexican descent who were United States citizens considered themselves Mexican American, or what term did they use back in those days?

R: Probably just "Mexican" or of Mexican origin. The terms "Latin American," "Mexican American," "Chicano" or any other applicable term developed from the standpoint of unity to gain recognition and power. Prior to that, no designated word was applicable. You see what I'm getting at?

E: Yes, sir, I do.

R: Only for the purpose of power did these terms develop.

E: You've lived in El Paso since 1933, is that right?

R: 1914.

E: Right, 1914. And then after you got your Law degree since 1933, right?

R: Yes.

E: When did you first hear the word "Chicano" in El Paso?

R: All my life.

E: You heard it all of your life?

R: Yes.

E: Even in the teens and the '20s?

R: Yes, most certainly.

E: In what context was this word used, do you recall?

R: Low level.

E: Lower level Mexicans?

R: Yes.

E: Could it be used to apply to Mexicans from México as well as Mexicans from the United States?

R: Yes, sir.

E: There was no distinction between citizenships?

R: Not as far as the word "Chicano" went.

E: When do you think it began to be used to distinguish Mexican Americans as it is used today?

R: After the Blacks acquired power.

E: So you'd say after the mid-60s it came to be used in that way?

R: Correct. Prior to that time it was just vernacular, common colloquialism.

E: Do you have any theory as to the origins of this word?

R: Yes.

E: What do you think it is?

R: It's euphonious: Mexican--Mexicano, Chicano. That's what it is--it's euphony.

E: When did you get married, Judge Rodríguez?

R: 1933.

E: As soon as you got out of Law School?

R: Yes, more or less.

E: How many children do you have?

R: Two.

E: Could you tell me what they do?

R: My daughter is a schoolteacher in Milpitas, California. My son is County Attorney of El Paso County. He's a lawyer also.

E: Did either of your children ever experience discrimination as they were growing up in El Paso?

R: I think they fitted my pattern. I don't think they did, other than the instances I've mentioned.

E: When you went into legal profession, could you tell me what the most important factor was in that decision? Was it family?

R: Probably my family--environment.

E: How long did your father live in El Paso with you?

R: From 1914 until 1934. He died in about '60 something.

E: Where did he live from 1934 on?

R: México City.

E: And your mother?

R: She went with him, of course.

E: Judge, when you were growing up as a young man in El Paso in the '20s, do you ever remember discussion of the "Zona Libre" issue?

R: I've heard that all my life.

E: What are your thoughts on the course of that issue?

R: You mean for international commerce? Imports and exports?

E: Right. Here in El Paso and Juárez especially.

R: I think this should be a free port.

E: Did Mexicans back in the '20s want this thing very badly back in the '20s?

R: They did, but this is the toughest border on the Mexican border.

E: Why do you say that, Judge?

R: We've always had problems here.

E: To what do you attribute those problems?

R: Midas power--the larger country lording it over a smaller country.

E: Do you think this is mostly the Anglo American element?

R: Yes.

E: Do you think they've been unduly abrasive in their relations with México, with Ciudad Juárez especially?

R: They've been strict, very strict.

E: Do you think this has been justified?

R: To some extent.

E: To what extent has it not been justified, specifically?

R: Well, when you become powerful you become abusive--not that the reason isn't there. The cause might be there, but you don't have to be high-handed about it, in other words.

E: Judge, during your career here in El Paso you've probably come to know just about every man of importance in this city. Do you know Fred Hervey?

R: Very well.

E: How long have you known Mr. Hervey?

R: Twenty-five years or more.

E: During the last campaign, Mr. Hervey made the point that he was probably the first mayor of El Paso to start breaking in Mexican Americans into the ranks of the city's policemen and such. Did he make a significant contribution in that area?

R: He probably contributed, but he wasn't the first.

E: Who was the first? Who did start making significant contributions in letting the Mexican Americans get into positions in the city?

R: I would say that Judge R. E. Thomason was the most influential and kindhearted in that sense.

E: In about what years did Judge Thomason play this role?

R: When he was mayor, in the late '20s I believe.

E: What kinds of positions would he fill with Mexican Americans?

R: He made Charlie Terrazas, who was later our Tax Collector, City Cashier, for one.

E: Now, Charlie Terrazas was extremely well known here in El Paso. Could you tell me something about his background?

R: Very colorful.

E: Where was he from?

R: Marfa.

E: Is he any relation at all to the Terrazas from Chihuahua?

R: Probably distantly related. His father was the Collector of Customs in the Marfa area--very prominent. His brother was commissioner, or maybe still is, in Snyder, Texas--Big Spring district--and was a sheriff there, which is hard to do.

E: You mentioned a Collector of Customs there. Did you ever know Zack Lamar Cobb?

R: Yes. He went to Los Angeles. He was a lawyer here.

E: When did he go to Los Angeles?

R: That was before my time.

E: Does he have any family at all in El Paso?

R: He probably does, but I'm not acquainted with them.

E: Going back to your Law School days, while you were going to the school

there in Tucson, do you recall how many Mexican Americans were attending while you were there?

R: Three.

E: Out of a group of about how many?

R: Eighty.

E: Did all three get their degrees?

R: Yes.

E: By any chance do you recall the names of those other two?

R: Lorenzo Gutiérrez, who later became an American Consul in Nogales I believe, but I'm not sure about that; Henry Anaya, who practiced law in Tucson with his father who was also a lawyer there; Refugio Pacheco, but he disappeared and I never heard any more of him.

E: Where was he from?

R: Tucson; and Robles, who was County Attorney and later Superior Court Judge; and myself are the ones I remember.

E: So that's about five. When you came back to El Paso to begin your practice, can you recall how many Mexican American lawyers there were in this town?

R: Frank Galván and I were the first of that period. Before that there was Octaviano Larazolo, who was a District Attorney here before my time and later became Governor of the state of New Mexico. He's got a son that

was United States District Attorney in Albuquerque.

E: Do you have any idea about how many Mexican American lawyers there are in this town today?

R: I'd say ten or something like that.

E: Do you think there should be more, or do you think that's fair representation in the profession?

R: That's hard to answer. I don't know.

E: Could you name some other District Judges in Texas who are Mexican descent?

R: Yes. E. D. Salinas from Laredo; Vela from Brownsville; García from Brownsville--he died last year; Guerra from Edinburg; Edward Márquez, here; I've got a list I can give them to you exact.

E: No, that's fine. We just wanted to have an idea. Judge how is your Spanish?

R: I think it's fairly good. Presumptuous on my part.

E: While you were growing up in El Paso, was there any approbrium attached to people who spoke Spanish?

R: Probably.

E: How about in school? Do you have any recollections? Were you allowed to speak Spanish?

R: I knew generally it was against the regulations, but no one ever called my hand on it.

E: Did you ever see them call anybody else's hand on it?

R: I probably did.

E: How does your son speak Spanish? Is his Spanish good?

R: Fair.

E: Did you ever encourage or discourage him from speaking Spanish?

R: I tried to teach him as much Spanish as I could.

E: And your daughter?

R: She speaks a little better.

E: Do you maintain much of a cultural affiliation with México?

R: I'm always interested in it.

E: Would you say that your son maintains some affiliation with it?

R: Probably in a social way.

E: We're nearing the 200th anniversary of the birth of the United States.

I suppose you could classify yourself as a Mexican American in 1975 living in El Paso. How do you relate to events that transpired on the eastern seaboard of the United States 200 years ago?

R: I don't quite understand your question.

E: Well, how do you relate to the American Revolution? What meaning does it have for you?

R: The birth of democracy.

E: When it comes to a question of your patriotism to the United States, how would you characterize it?

R: I'd characterize it 100%.

E: You have no political affiliation at all with México?

R: None whatsoever.

E: Would you say that's true of your children, too?

R: I would assume so. They would be further distant than I am.

E: Who do you consider to be the more prominent attorneys of Mexican descent in this town?

R: All right, but it's my own personal opinion. I would say Tati Santiesteban, my son, and presumptuous as it might be, myself.

E: Fair enough, Judge. We have done an interview with Mr. Santiesteban and his views are always very interesting. Do you think that your politics, your views on current issues, are kindred to his?

R: I would say so.

E: Judge, of the Mexican American leaders in the state of Texas today, to

your mind, who are the most prominent? Which of these leaders do you admire the most?

R: That's a very hard question. You see, we're way out here in the west. We don't have the contact with them in the central part of Texas. I thought for a time that Joe Bernal, the Senator from San Antonio was fairly prominent, but he got beat. I would say in the Senate right now, Tati is very prominent. Joe Gonzales, the Representative from the San Antonio district is prominent. You see, I'm limited in my observations to the legal profession, because there are leaders in education, medicine, and engineering, that I'm not entirely familiar with. But I'm certain beyond any shadow of a doubt that there are many.

E: Judge, to your mind, who are the more influential Mexican Americans in El Paso today? Influential from an economic standpoint for instance.

R: Emilio Peinado is one of them. Modesto Gómez has always figured prominently. Of course, I'm going back to the older ones. The young ones, I'm not too familiar with naturally.

E: During the '40s, for example, who were the more prominent Mexican Americans in El Paso?

R: Modesto Gómez, Simón Silva.

E: What line of work were they in?

R: Modesto was--is still--in the grocery business. Peinado's a builder, and engaged in other business. Silva owned Mexico Hardware, in hardware, exports. Rufino

Mora, Customs Broker with Bailey-Mora; there are several that were rich and prominent in economics.

E: In local politics, which of the two major political parties do you support?

R: 100% Democratic

E: In state politics?

R: Democrat.

E: In national politics?

R: Democrat all the way.

E: Judge, I want to thank you very much for your interview.

R: It was a pleasure.

E: It's been most enlightening and perhaps some day we can follow it up.

R: All right, any time.

E: Thank you, sir.

END OF THE INTERVIEW