

11-16-1976

Interview no. 256

Art Alba

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Interview with Art Alba by Juan Manuel Gonzales, 1976, "Interview no. 256," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Art Alba (1942-)
INTERVIEWER: Juan Manuel Gonzalez
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 16, 1976
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 256
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 256
TRANSCRIBER: Juan Manuel Gonzalez
DATE TRANSCRIBED: November 26, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Employee of the Federal Bureau of Investigation under the Federal Probation Department.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; life in South El Paso; discrimination; work with the Probation Department; community involvement.

45 minutes .
8 pages.

(Interview with Art Alba on November 16, 1976 by Juan Manuel González.)

G: When were you born and **where**?

A: November 11, 1943, El Paso, Texas.

G: What is your parents' background and/or their occupations?

A: My father is deceased. He died in 1960. During the time he was alive, he was a carpenter in México, and in the U.S. he worked as a janitor and as an elevator operator. My mother never worked, except for short periods of time. When she did work, she worked as a seamstress in a factory.

G: Where did you grow up?

A: I grew up in south-side El Paso, in the barrio as we call it. I did not leave what is known as the opposite side of the tracks, the south side of Paisano Street, until I was 22; I was a junior in college.

G: Were there any significant or interesting events during your childhood?

A: We lived a normal life in south-side El Paso. At the time I didn't know we were poor. I came from a very large family, eight in the family. My Dad did not make enough money to really supply enough for us, but as far as the type of life that I had, it was, at the time, adequate for me. We grew up (all the family) without many of necessities of life, but we learned to accept it. I was growing up in an era when gang warfare was at its peak. There were many times when I saw friends of mine or classmates that were actually stabbed, killed, or maimed through gang fights that occurred very close to where I was living, or at the school I was attending. This of course was very significant, because it made me aware of what was going on in the barrio and what could become of me, my friends, and my family if we were not interested in getting out of that type of environment. So essentially what motivated me to try to get out of that environment was seeing all these things: seeing friends that were right across the street from where I used to live that had what was known then as a "piquería,"--a place where you would go to shoot up on

heroin. I saw other youngsters, my own age, using marijuana, crawling in the streets and rolling in the gutters because they had reached the point where they could no longer control the use of narcotics and had gone on to become heroin addicts. Or even worse than that, some of them had died from overdose. So all these things were very significant, because I was growing up, and I was seeing all these things right around me.

G: Where and when did you attend school?

A: Regarding my education, I attended school in southside El Paso. My first school was Aoy Elementary School. From there I graduated to Bowie Junior High School in 1955. I remained at Bowie until 1961. When I graduated, I went on to what was then the Texas Western College. I spent the next four years there, and received my bachelor of science degree in Education in 1965.

G: Are there any significant or interesting events or incidents that stand out in your elementary, high school, or college years?

A: While I was in high school, again, the incidents that stand out in my mind are those which pertain to the type of curriculum that we had, the things that our teachers, counselor, and administrators thought about us; and how we were treated differently than what I now know happens in other schools-- other than those that are in the southside of El Paso. By this I mean that the curriculum was easier for us, because we were not as bright as the kids on the other side of the tracks. Therefore, things were not what they should have been. A person coming out of one of the schools in the southside was not as well prepared as a person that came out from Coronado, Irvin, Austin, El Paso High, and some other schools. And of course, this hurt all the individuals coming out of Bowie, for example, because of the fact that we were not competitive when we got out and started going to college or were out competing for jobs in the job market. This I found out to be true, because when

I graduated from Bowie High School, although my grades had been good grades and I was eligible for consideration into college, I was never counseled for this. In fact, I was counseled to go into vocational-type occupations, and for that reason I was placed in the Distributive Education program. Again, when I decided to go to college (because I received several scholarships) and I presented myself at Texas Western College, the first thing that I had was a negative experience. I was placed in a long, long line of people, the majority of which were Mexican Americans, to be tested to see if we understood the language and if we could read well enough to do college work. This was an embarrassing situation and certainly something that hurt me, because here I've been supposedly a good student in high school. And I get to the college level and they have to test me to see if I understand the English language--supposedly the language which I had received training in for the last 12 years. Then I realized that I was not as competitive as my Anglo classmates there at the college level, because of the failure of the school that I attended.

G: What were your social, cultural and recreational activities in school?

A: As far as social, cultural, and recreational activities when I was growing up, these things were part of the community, part of the barrio. It was not anything that was organized until Our Lady's Youth Center was set up in the early '50s. But prior to this all activities were centered around the home and around the neighborhood. Each one of the neighborhoods or barrios had their own different groups of kids working, playing and doing all kinds of things together. They had their own clubs, their own activities, their own games. It was very much a competitive type deal where one barrio would play another barrio. And many times it didn't get into gang warfare or anything like that; it was strictly competitive sports, which were good things. And when Our Lady's Youth Center finally came into being, we were able to get together and compete with one another

in various types of sports, that before we hadn't actually been able to participate in, such as wrestling, boxing, organized baseball sports, and many other activities.

G: What were the dating patterns among your peers?

A: Growing up in the barrio, we had essentially the same dating patterns as my peers across the tracks had, I think, around that time. I'm sure that we did not have the means of transportation, we did not have as much money as other high school students from other schools might have had, but we still enjoyed the same things. We went to dances, we went to football games, we got together in groups, we formed clubs, we tried to organize intramurals, we did many, many things like these. Of course, we also had our own type of activities, such as going on hikes to the mountains, and things that were very much of interest to us. And of course, as we were exposed to T.V. and the many programs there, these became new things for us. We tried to do things that were of an exciting nature, such as going up the river and coming down in makeshift rafts, and things like these. But, again, we were no different than a normal teenager in any other part of town.

G: How did you spend your typical Saturdays and Sundays?

A: We spent our Saturdays and Sundays doing essentially the same thing. Around those years, though, at the age of 14, I was working both Saturdays and Sundays because I wanted to have more money to help the family and also to save enough money to buy a car. So Saturdays and Sundays I was working as a clerk in a newsstand where I sold cigarettes, sodas, candy, newspapers and magazines. This was a very good experience for me; I learned the value of money, and of course I was able to save some and help the family. I became the person that was more respected among my peers in the sense that I always had a little money with me and I was working and doing something for myself. The older people in the com-

munity, in my neighborhood, thought of me as a person that had some goals, some desires to improve himself, and they tried to help me and encouraged me as much as possible. What was surprising though is that at the barrio, many times my own peers were the ones that held me back. They seemingly refused to accept the fact that through education one would improve himself. And any other person that wanted to do this was chastised by them because he wanted to become better than they were. They felt that if he got too much education, he would be a Tío Taco, leave the community, become uppity, and would never come back and be with them. Because of this, they would pull you back down, ridicule you, and try to make you see that you belonged to the barrio and that you should stay there forever. This was one of the hardest things that I had to overcome in my younger years, trying to make them realize that I was no different than they were, except that I had goals which I intended to carry through. By getting an education I was hoping that I would be able to improve my lot and that of my family; and then eventually that of people in the community, too. This was very, very difficult to get across to my friends and peers.

G: Starting with the first one, what jobs did you hold?

A: As a youngster, my father got me my first job. Although I had delivered papers, and had done a variety of things (selling all kinds of things to the braceros who were arriving there close to where I used to live, next to the river), I didn't get my first job until I was 14 years old and I became a clerk in a newsstand. After that, in 1959, I became a D.E. student and worked as a clerk, stockboy, at one of the men's retail stores in the center of town. Through this particular job, I was able to learn about merchandising. I stayed with this firm for nine years. While I was going to college I was able to pay for my own tuition and do everything else that I needed to do, plus buy clothing, which I

needed desperately. I was able to remain there and learn the merchandising field to where I could go into it later on. In 1965 when I graduated from college, I was offered a position there as assistant manager, but I did not take it. I went to work for Sears, Roebuck and Company in their management training program. Again I experienced something that I've experienced through all my life.

G: Did you experience any ethnic discrimination in your job experiences?

A: A degree of discrimination. In a sense, when I went to work for Sears, it was a reversal of the discrimination. It was around the time that discrimination was the topic of great concern. A lot of the larger firms were seeking people of minority groups, and for that reason I think they hired me as one of the first management training program trainees. I worked for them for approximately two years. I got excellent advantages. I was able to move on up the ladder quite fast. I was in line for a promotion, possibly to Central or South America in the Credit Department when I decided to leave the Sears Company. I believe that partly my efforts were the reason for my rapid advancement; but more so the fact that I was one of the first Mexican Americans in the management training program that opened a lot of doors for me. After leaving Sears Company, I went to work for the El Paso Public School as a Distributive Education Coordinator at Austin High School. I remained there for seven and a half years, and enjoyed the program thoroughly. The program that I had was where I placed students in a job and they worked half a day in the retail outlets throughout the city. This was an enjoyable time of my life. From there I was promoted to assistant principal of Jefferson High School, and I remained there two years.

G: What led to your involvement in the field of Probation?

A: Subsequent to this, I applied for the position with the Federal Probation Office here in El Paso and I was accepted. I came to work, and have been working for

them for the last two years. Again, I believe strongly that this is not the last job that I'll ever have. I hope to be promoted; and if I'm not promoted, then I will seek other avenues of advancement. My area of expertise is basically in working with people related to employment, employment placement, and development of human resources, developing jobs within the community, and all kinds of other areas of endeavor that have to do with business, work, placement, and such things as that. I trained as a D.E. student in high school. I worked in retailing for almost nine years, prior to entering the retailing field with Sears on a full time basis. I had that training and was manager of the Men's Department at Sears, and from there I went to the school system. I trained students in job applications, job retention. I communicated with the business community in developing jobs for the students that hoped to enter the field of marketing and distribution as a career; and in doing so, I have known many, many people in the business community, acquaintances and friendships that have developed from this work that I have done. They have been very helpful in the present work that I'm doing, which is as a probation and parole officer, where I still have a need to develop the community resources to place ex-offenders. And I also need to continue with my efforts to help those people that I've been in contact with while I was a school teacher, assistant principals, or in any other capacity. This continues now because that's my area of interest. I feel that a person that is working, that is supplying his own needs, is a person that can get ahead and that can stay out of trouble. So those are the things I want to do with my life. In my time as a school teacher I've seen quite a few of my former students succeed in the business community. Many of them are now business owners or managers, supervisors, or what have you. And this is certainly a rewarding experience for me, seeing that whatever training they were able to obtain in high school and partly through my efforts, and through their

own dedication, they've been able to make a success of themselves. These things are very, very important to me, because I know that there is a fruit of one's efforts. This again is what I'm trying to do with the Federal Probation. We are trying to develop a job placement program for the ex-offender; and it's a very difficult thing to do, but we're on the way.

G: Are you politically involved in the community?

A: I have always been very much concerned with the community and the political situation that we have here. Although we have a majority of the population being of the minority grouping, Mexican American, we still have so many people that do not exercise their rights. This is something that concerns me. Ever since I was able to vote, I've been voting. And of course, the first time, I was afraid⁷--I guess I'm still afraid when I go into one of those booths. But I do it because I know I have to, and because I know that's the only way that we can do something for our own people and for ourselves. I do advise everyone that I come in contact with that the only way they can express their feelings, make a dent in those things that bother them, is to vote and express their opinions. I am active to a degree, although my job at the present time prevents me from becoming too politically involved. I do much of this with people that I talk to. And I did this too when I was teaching Adult Basic Education for people that were interested in getting their citizenship.

G: Are you involved in community organizations?

A: As regards to Mexican American organizations in the community, I have never subscribed to their policies or to their philosophies. And I've refused to align myself with any one in particular. Although I have involved myself with LULAC at times, I've also gotten away from it when I thought that their ideals and their philosophies were not the same as mine. Some of these younger organizations--and I say younger by the people that are involved in them--I feel are "extremists."