

11-30-1976

## Interview no. 270

Armando A. Sanchez

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO  
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Armando A. Sánchez  
INTERVIEWER: Rosa Morales  
PROJECT: Class project, History 3309  
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TRANSCRIBER: Rosa Morales  
DATE TRANSCRIBED: December 1, 1976

**BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:**

Mr. Sánchez was born on April 15, 1920 in El Paso. He attended Bowie High School. In 1941 he joined the U.S. Army and retired after 26 years of duty. He fought in World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam. Now he is a resident of El Paso attending The University of Texas at El Paso and will graduate in May 1977.

**SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:**

Biography; rumrunners and bootleg joints during Prohibition; incidents in his Army career during World War II; his job of teaching infantry tactics, weaponry and survival tactics to U.S. and foreign troops; discrimination in Texas; the word "Chicano"; future plans.

1 1/4 hours  
17 pages

INTERVIEW WITH ARMANDO A. SANCHEZ by Rosa Morales, November 30, 1976

M: What is your name?

S: My name is Armando A. Sánchez.

M: When were you born?

S: I was born on April 15, 1920.

M: Where were you born?

S: I was born here in El Paso.

M: How long have you lived in El Paso?

S: On and off I've lived ~~(here)~~ about 25 years.

M: How large is your family?

S: I have three married children.

M: Where were your parents born?

S: My mother was born here in El Paso and my father was born in Anthony, Texas.

M: Do they live in El Paso?

S: Yes, they do.

M: What is your level of education?

S: At the moment I'm a senior at The University of Texas at El Paso.

M: What schools did you attend?

S: I attended first Guardian Angel School, [a] Catholic school; then Zavala, public; Burleson, which is now Jefferson High School; and Bowie High School.

M: Can you tell me some major incidents which happened to you while you were in school?

S: Yes, at the time it was in the early '30s when we use to have a lot of these rumrunners around the neighborhood where I used to live. We used to live on San Antonio and Guaymas down in East El Paso, and rumrunners used to come across right there at that point, Guaymas and the border. The border was divided at that time by a wire fence, but the wire fence was either

cut at different places where people [would] come across or there were holes underneath the fence. The rumrunners used to come across in bunches of five or six with one lookout man in front. The lookout man always used to carry a .30-30 caliber rifle or carbine and a .45 in his holster, and every rumrunner had a .45 in his hand. The ones that had the load used to put alcohol or whiskey or whatever in five gallon cans, square tin cans. [Then] they'd put [the cans] in gunny sacks, tie [them] together, swing the sacks over their shoulders like saddle bags, and they could run with them real fast. The lookout for the bunch would go across first. He would get to the top [of a] little hill right after crossing the border, just before getting to San Antonio Street, which was at that time an alley starting from there going west. He would go up the hill [and] check the alley to see if there were any Border Patrolmen. If he did not see any Border Patrolmen, he would signal his men to come across. They would get to the top of the hill, and then he would run ahead another half block, which was San Antonio, look around, and if the coast was clear, he would signal his men and take off again--just the way we used to do it in the infantry.

There were times when the Border Patrol got word that there was going to be some rumrunners coming across, and they would set up for them. They would hide around a few houses that were there [and] set up machine-guns. They would wait until all the rumrunners had come across the border, and as soon as they were [at] about San Antonio Street and Guaymas, they would start firing at [them] from all directions. They did not care where the bullets went, whether there were any people around, even though it was at night. It was not so late at night though, [because] the rumrunners used

to come across a little after dusk. Our house being right there at the corner, the walls were all full of bullet holes. And the windows--my father had to replace windows about every other week. After the shooting was over, he used to come out real mad and tell the Border Patrolmen that they would have to replaster the house and replace the windows. They used to just look at him and say, "Yea, yea, yea," but they never did. So my father had to go to the expense. He never did plaster the house, but he did replace the window panes.

Around the neighborhood where we used to live between Guaymas and Stevens, there were quite a few bootleg joints. In fact, on my block there were three of them, two on one side of the street and one on the other. Some of the rumrunners would come across and drop off the load and go right back. [At] other times they would go to Rivera Street (about a block north from San Antonio) and some cars would be waiting for the load. They would throw [the load] in the car, the car would take off, and the rumrunners would go back across the border. These bootleg joints, if you did not cater to their business, you did not know they were bootleg joints because they were just plain houses. I knew about them because I used to live next door to them. They used to sell the alcohol for \$.05. A man would come over, buy a soda pop for a nickel, put the shot of alcohol in the soda pop and that was all he needed-- \$.10 to get high. Beer, which was home brewed, was a nickel a bottle. At times when they got raided, the Border Patrol would go in these houses and would bring out all the crocks where they were brewing the beer, and they would break them right there on the curb, on the side of the street. If they found the cans of whiskey or alcohol they would dump them out in the street too. Bottles of home brew, they would bring them out and break them on the street. But,

that is when they found it, because a lot of these houses had false floors. [They were] not really cellars, just a hole made under the floor. They would stash their bootleg stuff in these. As the people would come to buy, they would just open a trap door underneath their rug or underneath the kitchen table. Besides the kitchen table they had another couple of little tables there in case they got word that they were going to be raided. [If they got word of a raid,] they would immediately take the drinks away from the men sitting in there and put a bowl of menudo or some tacos or beans or whatever they had on the stove. They always had something just in case. And sometimes men would go in there on Sunday mornings to eat menudo. They say menudo is good for hangovers; I don't know about that.

When I was in high school, some friends across the street from me and their cousins (about six of us) got together and bought an old car, an Erskine. I have never seen another car like that. I don't know where this car came from, but that was the name of it, Erskine. We used it to go to school, a bunch of us guys. On our way to school [we used] to pick up girls walking along Magoffin toward Bowie High School. By the time we got to school, there were twelve or fifteen kids in the car, all piled in there. In the back seat or in the back of the front seat we could hide cigarettes and maybe a pint of wine. We used this car to go to the football games. For the football games only four guys rode. There was a teacher that used to ride with us to the football games. We used to fight among us to see who she was going to sit next to, even though she was an older woman. It was good times. At that time, cars started to come out with radios, and we did not have a radio. Some guys would ride by with their radios on full blast and we were kind of envious, but we could not afford to buy a radio for our old jalopy. So what we did, we got ourselves

an old graphophone, one of those you crank, and some old records. They **must** have been old Pancho Villa records, 'cause that's the way they sounded. We used to drive around the neighborhood about five miles an hour so that you could hear that we had music in our car too. Real proud! We would then go downtown to El Paso Street, wave at the girls, and finally we would end up on Ninth Street which at that time it was the Red Light District. We would drive by waving at the girls. It was dusk, and all the girls were standing at the door waving at us, laughing at our squeaky voice music we had. That's the way they sounded at that time. We did have a good time while we were kids.

M: What were the dating patterns when you were in school?

S: Oh, the same as today, I guess. I had a special girl who used to do my History work, which is a subject I never did like. Every time History period would come, I would fall asleep. Everyday we used to have a quiz about what we had the day before, but since I was asleep, I did not know anything. This girl would sit next to me and make two papers. At the end of the quiz, she would hand me one and all I had to do was sign it and turn it in. And that is how I passed History. To show my gratitude, I asked her to go out. I would take her to the movies, The Palace, which was the cheapest theater.

Besides the Palace, we had the Plaza, and L&A. Of course, the cheapest was the Alcazar, across [from] the Colon. We could go in for \$.05 and watch nothing but serials--Zoro, Tarzan, and what have you. But we didn't take the girls there. When we were down and out and only had a dime, that is where we would go. We used to take the girls to the Palace; that was the big time theater. Another movie house, which was on Alameda and Raynor, was the Alameda Theater and they would have this give-away. You would go

in there and buy the ticket, and the ticket would have a number on it. They would draw a number about halfway through [the movie]. They would give a set of dishes or couple of chickens, something small, but to attract people to the theater. And again mostly what they showed was nothing but serial shows.

M: Can you tell me what you did on weekends?

S: On Saturday night we went to dances. We would get together and drive around the neighborhood just like a lot of the kids do today. [We'd be] gatecrashers. If we knew someone [at a dance, we'd ask], "How about taking us in?" We would go in and dance. Sometimes we came over to El Paso and San Antonio; upstairs there was a dance hall and we used to go up there and dance our heads off to the jitterbug, dances like that.

M: When did you start to work?

S: I was still in high school. I started working during the summers because my grandfather, being an old, mean Spaniard, didn't want me and my uncle (my mother's brother, being the same age as myself) to be running around, so he would take us to work with him. He was a cement contractor and just about every house north of the railroad tracks has cement that we poured: cement driveways, porches, garage floors and what have you. That was hard work. He used to make us work our butts off. He'd say, "Just because you are my kids don't think you are going to take it easy. You are going to work as hard, if not harder than the other guys." He paid us a dollar a day [and] at that time, \$7 a week, which is what we worked, would last us a long time. In fact, [after] the whole weekend, we still had money left. Now you earn \$200 weekly and by the end of the week you are flat broke. [We] could buy a lot for our dollars. I worked hard until I got out of high school in '37.



I kept working for my grandfather until I joined the Army in September 1940. I joined the Army Air Corps and was stationed in Martfield, California. In 1941 my outfit was transferred from the States to Guam. Not all the outfit was transferred at one time--one-third left in October and the one-third that was going to replace in Guam left at the same time. So actually two-thirds [of the outfit] was left in Guam, two-thirds was left in the middle of the ocean, and two-thirds was left in Martfield at that time, because they did not want to leave the post vacant. There were three of us that joined the Army together. One of my buddies left in October. The second one [left] in November 1941, and I left on December 5, 1941. We were close to Hawaii when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. I remember very clearly, I was standing on the rail just looking out at the ocean, [there was] nothing else we could do. All of a sudden I saw the wake of another ship, and [I] said, "Say guys, another ship went by here." And then I looked toward the rear of the ship, and I saw that it was our own ship's [wake]. We had made a U Turn. I said, "Hey, we are going back." Then after a little while the ship's commander said over the intercom, "Turn in all your radios and cameras." We did not know what was going on, so we turned them in, [and] settled down. About thirty hours later, I was on the rail watching the water, because I didn't like to play cards with the rest of the guys, and I saw the Golden Gate Bridge again. I said, "We are back in San Francisco. What happened?" We all started hollering. Then as we were going into the San Francisco Bay, a pilot boat got along the side of the ship [and] the pilot got aboard. He told us that the Japs had attacked Pearl Harbor. We all hollered, "Well, let's go back and get them out of there!" How could we do that? We were not even armed. It was a troop ship, which had actually been a cargo ship. It used to carry cattle,

and the stink below deck--Oh, God! It was something else. Then besides that it had a load of onions in the same hull where we were, so most of us slept and ate up on deck.

Well, anyway, he gave us the news, and then we got into port. A few of us, like myself and the rest of my unit were what we used to call "a bunch of little bastards" because we didn't have a mother, we did not have a unit. Our unit in Guam had either run into the jungles or had been captured. In fact my first buddy, the one which left in October, ran into the jungles and joined the Philippine guerillas. The second one was captured and was a Japanese prisoner of war for over three years--may he rest in peace--he did not come out of it too good, because it affected his mind. He was here after he got out of the Army [and] he was having hallucinations about the different prisons and the way he was treated. He started drinking, and before you knew it, he became an alcoholic and died an alcoholic. The other one, after the war was over, came out of the jungles and had a Philippino girl with him, and he married her. He still lives in El Paso and works at Fort Bliss.

Myself, from then on I have been in the Army and traveled all over. I was in the Air Corps at that time. I was in [the] ground crew, but since I did not have an outfit and some of the others did not have outfits, they got us and said, "From here to here you are going to be in a certain outfit." I was lucky, I got Infantry. Yea, "lucky," but I loved it; and ever since I have been an infantryman. I became very adapted to it. I have taught infantry tactics to enlisted men, high ranking officers at O.C.S., [and] foreign officers visiting the United States. I have taught enlisted men and officers of the armies of Latin America, all the way from Mexico to the tip of South America. [And] all my teaching was done in Spanish.

I had to translate all the material from English to Spanish. Besides infantry, I have taught weaponry, all weapons, plus their own weapons, which a lot of the military men from South America didn't know how to operate. They just knew the weapon which was issued to them, and that's it. I taught communist weapons, parachuting, and survival: survival in the jungle, water, desert, and snow--anywhere. Survival was my specialty.

M: Can you tell me of some major incidents which happened to you while you were in the service?

S: I remember one time I was doing my parachute jumps--my third jump, qualifying jump for parachuters. We were taught you should always look out for yourself and for your buddies too. In other words, when you are floating down you are not supposed to get too close to your buddies because you are liable to get tangled up. I made this jump, and I checked my left, it was clear. [I] checked to my right, it was clear; forward, I was clear; [and in] back of me, it was clear. When I checked my left [again], the guy which was floating next to me was not there anymore. Then I felt something hit my feet--his chute was on my feet. I hollered to him, "Yea, you son of a gun, drift off because you are going to rock the air out of my shoes." But at that same time I kept my cool. I ran across his parachute, the top of his parachute. He was drifting to the right so I pulled my risers to my left so I could drift left [and] stay away from him. That was a funny sensation--running over the top of the chute. It reminded me of when we used to go down [to] the valley, to the cotton gins. [We'd] get on those big piles of cotton and just run over them and sink up to your waist. That is how it [felt] running across his chute. It was a wonder I did not collapse his chute. I drifted away okay, and I pulled my risers because I wanted to follow that guy. He landed, and I landed

about 10 feet away from him--you have never seen somebody get out of the parachute harness so fast. In fact, I think I was out of it before I hit the ground, because I wanted to get to that guy. [I] beat the heck out of him, until the lieutenant came over and got me away from him. He said, "I should do that." He was mad, because he saw everything that was going on. He was the control officer on the ground and [with] a megaphone and would tell us, "Hey number 30 drift to your right, to your left, you are getting to close." He saw this guy, but this guy was not paying attention. What he wanted was to land as close to the turn-in point as possible so [that] he would not have to carry the parachute a long distance.

Another time, during the war (WWII) in Africa...it's funny, things happen to you and you don't think about them until years later. I remember when I volunteered to drive an ammunition truck up to the front lines. A buddy of mine said, "Well, let's go. If they blow our trucks up, oh what the hell, we do not have anybody waiting for us at the States; we're not married." We were just happy-go-lucky kids; we did not care. Those trucks were being blown up daily. Well, we were driving down the road and I saw him stop, he was about 100 yards ahead of me, so I stopped. We did not want to get too close together in case they hit one of the trucks it wouldn't blow up the other one. He made a signal with his hand that he was going to eat. I took out my rations and started eating. Then I looked over toward his truck and I saw him running up the hill waving his hands and arms signaling me to go. I thought, "What the hell...why is he running up there, is he crazy?" What happened was that he saw three German planes coming toward us. They were attacking us, but the thing was, they were coming across the road. If they would have come with the road, they would have blown us up. The funny thing about it, though, was that

I was heating a cup of cocoa in a small gas stove, I had my biscuits in my left hand and my cup in my right, and when I saw the planes coming (there was a ditch right next to the road) I didn't run and drop the food. I was thinking more of my belly than losing my life. I eased down to the bank of the ditch, raised some weeds which were at the bottom of the ditch, and hid my cocoa and crackers. Then I laid down flat on the ground; even though, if the truck had been hit, it would have made a hole big enough to bury this building, and I would have gone with it. But that's exactly what I did. After they went, they made a pass [at the trucks, but] their bullets went in front of my truck [and] none of them hit, lucky for me. When they went to make another pass, they banked to the left, and they were going to hit along the road. They would have gotten us, but at that time, just as they were banking, two British Spitfires showed up and chased them away. They knocked one of them down and they were chasing the other two. It was funny, though, the way I saw danger coming and instead of running or panicking I just eased down into the ditch to hide my cocoa. After they left, I couldn't find my cocoa. I said, "What the hell did I do with it, where is it?" That is how the mind works, I guess, my subconscious hid it and my conscious did not know what the hell was going on. Finally I remembered, "Oh yes, I hid it someplace." I started lifting up weeds until I found it, and I proceeded with my lunch. A lot of things happened during the war. Some things you want to remember, some things you want to forget, but can't.

M: How did you get wounded?

S: I was wounded about five times. In Africa on my leg; in Korea and Viet Nam a piece of shrapnel tore my insides when a bomb went off next to me. I

was in Special Forces and we were getting ready to go out [when] one of the 20 milimeter rockets fell close to me. The piece of shrapnel, no bigger than a quarter, it went inside my belly and tore up my liver and my guts. All I remember is when I went down. When I came to, it was three days later. The first face I saw was kind of hazy; it was my wife. I thought I was dead. I was supposed to be in Viet Nam, [but] I was looking at my wife's face. What happened was, they flew me from Viet Nam to Japan; Japan flew me all the way to William Beaumont right away. They started the surgery over there, but they couldn't do it because I was all torn up inside. So they did most of the surgery here. In fact, I had one leg in the grave; they told me the Chaplain had already come to give me the [last rites], but I got out of it. My wife was there when the General came and pinned a medal on me. The General said, "We nearly lost you."

When I got out of the hospital nine months later, I went to the Schools of the Americas and taught there. I was still in the Special Forces and still teaching infantry tactics, [and] weaponry, all the weapons that the infantry uses. I loved it over there because you could go in the jungle, live off of it: big aguacates about as big as melons, guayabas, coconuts, bananas, mangos, and changos. I used to hunt monkeys, howler monkeys, and they holler something awful. When you hear them for the first time, it gives you chills. I used to hunt them with a provisional hunter, the slingshot. And we used to eat them. Iguanas, we used to knock them off trees and eat them; they're good. That's why I was teaching survival, [because] you can't starve in the jungles. A lot of people do [starve] because they get scared; especially at night, they start hearing noises and [the] rustling of the weeds and they get panicky. They don't know what to eat, what kind of weeds [and] shrubbery to eat [or] where to get water.

That was my thing; [that was] what I used to teach.

M: Have you gotten involved with community organizations or any type of clubs?

S: I belong to the V.F.W. As far as community organizations, I go once in a while and help pass out the trays for the senior citizens at the V.F.W. This program is daily during the week at 10:30. They go pick up the ones without transportation and take them to the V.F.W. building. They give them exercises, sing songs, teach them to square dance. At noon, they give them a big meal, and then keep on. Of course, these senior citizens have to register and they get the big meal free. That's what I have done, just help pass out the trays and talk to these old men and women who go there to celebrate their birthdays--a lot of them do not have any kids here. The director has a big cake [which says] "Happy Birthday," and everybody that has a birthday on that date or close to it celebrates it that week. They sit them at a special table with the cake and hats just like a bunch of kids, you know. It feels good helping people like that.

M: When you were in the service, can you tell me how the Anglos and Mexican-Americans treated each other? Did you notice any discrimination?

S: No, there was no discrimination in my unit. In the Air Corps, I had some Anglo buddies, we used to go to town and have a good time together. One time, a soldier from my outfit went AWOL in California. He was living in San Antonio and we got the word from the police that they had picked him up. The military police had called the local police to check on him to see if he was home. They sent two of us, an Anglo and myself. We decided to go in his car. We drove by here and we stayed at my house for a day, eating good chow. We kept on going and we went down to East Texas, a little beyond Marfa. There was a lot of discrimination against Mexicans. You could not go into a restaurant. If you wanted to eat, they would feed

you at the back door. We did not know that, [so] we walked in this restaurant and ordered the meal. The guy says, "Well, I can give you his order, but for you, go out to the back door and you get yours in back." [I said], "What?" [He said], "We don't serve Mexicans here." My buddy being an Anglo said, "Listen, he is as much American as you are. He may not be an Anglo but he is an American. He is in the U.S. Army. If you don't feed both of us, we are going to shoot up this place." He pulled out his .45 and set it on the table and I pulled out mine and set it on the table. I cocked mine, and he cocked his. The guy said, "Right away, right away." He fed us. And they sent the police after us, but they couldn't prove anything because only the guy was there at the restaurant. It was just a greasy spoon outfit. They checked our car but there was nothing stolen. They called our outfit and they told them that we were on a mission. There was no integration as far as the colored and white soldiers until 1949. They started to put a few colored soldiers in white outfits and they were kind of afraid. They were always looking behind their shoulders to see if anybody was following to kick them or something. We welcomed them in our outfit and told them to relax, [that] we were one and the same in the military.

M: How about when you were a teenager, when you lived here in El Paso?

S: I can't say I experienced any discrimination because I went everywhere; movies, restaurants; everywhere. Nobody discriminated against me here in El Paso, that I can think of, only down in East Texas.

M: What does the word Chicano mean to you?

S: That is a good question. I have been trying to find the meaning or why some people call themselves Chicano. I don't know. What I learned in



anthropology was that Chicano was a word brought over by the Indians in México. They used to call the Mexicans Mechicanos instead of Mejicanos and Chicano (it said in that particular book that we were reading for anthropology, The Mexican American) comes from that. If you ask me if I am a Chicano, frankly I'll say no--I am an American. I might be of part Mexican descent, my mother is Sicilian and my father is Spanish. Their grandfathers came across the border. I guess because Pancho Villa was after them; that's how they were born here. What is Chicano? I still don't know.

M: Would you feel offended if someone called you Chicano?

S: Somewhat.

M: Why?

S: Because I'm not a Chicano. I don't think I would feel offended, but I'm not one that would say, "I'm a Chicano. Viva los Chicanos" and all that stuff. If someone would say, "There goes a Chicano," all right. But if an Anglo said that, I would turn around and say, "I'm not a Chicano, I'm just as much an American as you are. I've put over 26 years in the U.S. Army, and if that doesn't make me an American, I was born here and my parents were born here." Sometimes I get into arguments on account of that. I'm kind of hot headed; I'd rather walk away than start a fight, now, because if the guy is bigger than me I can't run too fast.

M: How do you spend your days?

S: Studying and doing odd things around the house. Like today, I was supposed to put up a couple of lamps, block a window and put mirror tiles where the window was. Then we went to Juárez and bought some swag lamps; [my wife] wants them up. Women, I don't know! But most of the time I spend it studying or reading, [or] working on term papers.

M: What are your plans for the future?

S: When I graduate, God willing, I hope to get a job with Welfare, helping people. When I started college, I had planned to become an R.N. and then go to school to become a Physician's Assistant since I thought I was too old to become a doctor. But a doctor at Beaumont told me [that] I was not too old to become an M.D. At college [though], they had their standards set up too high--I am an average student. When I put in my application, they put it at the bottom because they were getting all the A's on the top--about 18 applicants out of 45 made it. Since I had a little training in the military, being a team chief in the Special Forces, I had to know a lot about the medics. I had to know what the medic in my team was doing, and if it was right. If ever he would get knocked off, I would do his work. I can do minor surgery, but that's about it. In fact, when I worked in [the] hospital, the doctor knew about the training I had had, [so] he always made me do the R.N.'s work. I was not an R.N., I was just an orderly. I worked there for three months, and decided I wanted to be a Physician's Assistant; that was when I started college.

Since I couldn't make it the first year, they sent me a letter [saying], "Your name was not picked." I went to see the director of the Nursing Department and asked him why my name wasn't picked. He came out and said, "Because you are an average student. We are picking higher grade students for this type of training." I said, "Yea, but look at it this way, you are getting students that think being a nurse, an R.N., is a glorified career. They don't think of the work; they are not dedicated. I know what it is. A lot of [them] you show them a little blood and they pass out, they faint. I can open you up, pull all your guts out, put them back in, sew you up, and you keep on walking that afternoon." I said,

"I know how to do it!" He said, "Yea, but still, school standards." I got mad and told him what he could do with the Nursing Program. I wanted to go into a field [where] I could study the people and still help them, so I chose Sociology instead of Psychiatry. In Sociology I can work with groups of people and learn a lot about how groups work, why they influence each other within the group, and how one group influences another. With a psychology degree, you have to keep on going in order to... Well, actually in sociology, the more you study the more you learn. But, with a B.A. I think you can go out in the field and start working, then later on [you can] go to graduate school. These are my plans as far as my education is concerned.

M: Thank you very much, Mr. Sánchez.

S: You are welcome; anytime, any place.