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Interview no. 280

Ruben B. Salcido

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Ruben B. Salcido (1922-)
INTERVIEWER: Pedro Quiroz
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 6, 1976
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Civil Service employee. Born in Sanderson, Texas, February 15, 1922, Mr. Ruben B. Salcido came to El Paso, Texas, in 1929. His parents came from México around 1900. Mr. Salcido's father worked the railroads in Victoria, Sanderson, and El Paso, where he retired a mechanic by trade, Mr. Salcido is a World War II veteran who participated in the D-Day landing at Omaha Beach. He works at Fort Bliss, Texas, for the German Air Defense School. He has a seventh grade education with an equivalent high school GED rating, although he has no diploma.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; the Depression; World War II; discrimination.

1 hour
16 pages.

Q: Ruben, I have known you for a couple of years, and you have some interesting facts. But before we go into that, I would like some basic background. As you know, this will be recorded for the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso. For that then, would you state your name?

S: Ruben B. Salcido.

Q: When and where were you born?

S: I was born February 15, 1922, in Sanderson, Texas.

Q: How about your parents, Ruben? Were they born in Sanderson?

S: They were born in Santa Rosalía, Camargo, México.

Q: Do you have interesting information of them? How did they cross the river?

S: They came to the frontier of Juárez approximately in 1900 and crossed into El Paso.

Q: Do they tell you anything as to how they crossed the river? Did they wade, swim, or pay anything?

S: They didn't have to pay anything, and they didn't need to have any passport or nothing. According to what I know, they just took their names down and that was it.

Q: How many crossed?

S: My mother, my father, three sisters, and one brother crossed.

Q: So really, you grew up in El Paso?

S: I came to El Paso in 1929 at the age of about six years old.

Q: So your parents came from México and went to Sanderson where you were born. Any particular reason for that?

S: From here they went to Victoria, Texas, where the railroad was recruiting for work, not in the round-house, but in the railroad gangs. From Victoria they offered him a job in Sanderson, Texas, in the round-house. He started

there as laborer; later, he became a boilermaker, from which he retired in El Paso.

Q: Round-house--what is that?

S: The railroad round-house, where they have the shops of the steam engines.

Q: Where they fix the engines?

S: Where they do all kinds of repairs.

Q: From Sanderson, my father had a pretty good job, but they started laying off people. He got laid off, so he came to El Paso. But he went back; he was hired back. We spent another two to three years there until he got another RIF. With that reduction-in-force, he got transferred here to El Paso. He got a job in the Southern Pacific shops till he got retired.

Q: Do you recall any interesting events that he might have told you as to his job? Let's go into discrimination. Did he face discrimination that you know of?

S: He did have problems like everyone else, but they were problems that he himself took care of. He got along with everybody. He did what he was told to do and that was the way to get along with these people.

Q: Ok, now , let's get back to you. How about your education, Ruben. When and where did you go to school?

S: I have very little education. I didn't have a chance to go to school. Of course, I would have had a chance if I had taken advantage of the GI Bill, but it was just one of those things. I had a job at the time. As far as schooling is concerned, I only went to about the sixth or seventh grade at Beall school in east El Paso.

Q: Is that the one on Piedras and Magoffin?

S: Yes, Piedras, Magoffin, Raynor, and Rivera also cross by there.

Q: Is there anything interesting about that school or when you went to that school?

S: I was about nine or ten years old when I went to school, and well, I was the biggest guy in the class. Of course, as you know, I'm tall, and I've been a big kid since then. One of the teachers in class one time called me a "Big Elephant," so from then on, I was a "Big Elephant" for the whole school. They didn't know me by Ruben, but by "Big Elephant." Mrs. Sea, our Reading teacher, used to call me that.

Q: Were all your teachers there at that time Anglo, or did you have any Mexican-Americans?

S: At that time we didn't have any Mexican-American, or of Mexican descent at all. They were all Anglos.

Q: So, we're talking of about 1930?

S: Around 1932, 1933.

Q: Now we can go into the Depression. Can you tell me anything about your family or yourself?

S: My father was retired and he used to have a little money. He started a little business even before the Depression, but he had bad luck. In the first place, he didn't know anything about a grocery store. And second, my brothers and sisters couldn't help him because they didn't know about business either. And then the Depression came and he lost everything. From then on he had to go to work, but there was no work at all. We used to manage because he still had a little bit left, I guess. He got himself a job after President Roosevelt came into office and started all those works--WPA and so forth. He started working on farms for as little as 75¢ a day. Then he got on Relief Fund where they used to give you clothes, food, and all that kind of stuff. Well, finally things started

changing, and that's when I had a hard time at school. I became a body able to work and started helping him. Of course, my sisters and brothers used to help out too whenever they could find a job. I started working with these Jewish people, around Cotton Street, at El Paso Iron and Metal. They used to work you like a horse for about \$1.25 a day. We used to get wood from there to heat us during winter. We used to get a lot of old boards that they used to pile up there. My father asked for all these pieces of lumber. I would walk from Rivera Street, about the 3300 block, all the way to Cotton. I used to pick up the wood and carry it on my back all the way to the house, then I started chopping it. It was hard work, but we managed.

Q: So this was about the time that you quit school?

S: No, not right then. I quit school when I was about 13 or 14 years old. Then I started working on farms. We used to do farm work for Lee Moore ranches in the cotton fields. We used to go out and have to stay over there, you know, they used to have some quarters. We used to stay till the end of the week, then we'd come home.

PAUSE

Q: You were talking about working on a farm where you stayed all week. How many children were in your family?

S: Sixteen, but six died.

Q: What year were you working on the farm?

S: That was around 1937 or 1938.

Q: Do you want to tell me anything more about life on the farm?

S: Well, if you want what went on there... We used to be followed by a guy on a horse.

Q: What was he, the overseer?

- S: No, he was the big boss. We used to have a gang leader and the big boss. The big boss was an Anglo guy. He used to ride on a horse all day long. He kept right behind us. Everytime you'd leave a little piece of weed or petal of cotton behind, he'd make you go back and pick it up; otherwise you'd get fired.
- Q: So you're talking picking clean cotton. I remember when I did it, we'd pick it dirty--throw in everything.
- S: No, this was clean stuff. If you'd leave just a little piece hanging down from the capullo, he'd holler at you, "Hey, you left something back here." You had to run back and get it!
- Q: What were the wages at this time?
- S: They used to pay by the pound. They'd pay about 35 to 40¢ a 100 pounds. So you'd really have to go to town before you could make a dollar. I wasn't a very good cotton picker.
- Q: I remember when I did it, they wouldn't let us pick till the sun came out, so that the cotton would dry out.
- S: Yes, it had dew on it, and that would make it weigh more. What we used to do was pick the bottom first because that was still wet--the top was dry. So, you'd pick all the bottom ones till you had something a little heavier, to make it weigh more.
- Q: Did you have only one row, or did you choose two and go down the middle?
- S: We used to get two rows at a time.
- Q: How about snakes, did you have any trouble with them?
- S: No, we didn't have any snakes up there. We had all kinds of bugs and stuff over in the quarters. We lived in adobe homes with no floors, nothing but the ground. You had to clean out first, then go to sleep.
- Q: Anything else you want to add about this time in your life?

S: No, I guess that's about it for the farm. One time I came home to find my brother-in-law and sister had opened a restaurant. It was a bar-restaurant on Florence Street in the city market. They used to call it Market Buffet. They asked if I wanted to work for them at \$5 per week. I figured that was better than in the cotton fields in the cold and all that stuff. I worked for them for about a year or so. I even learned how to cook. And they used to leave me by myself and I used to take care of the kitchen. They paid me a little more later, about \$7 or \$8.

Q: This was around what year?

S: It was around 1939 or 1940 when I started as a dishwasher.

Q: That pretty well takes us into the Second World War.

S: Yes, I was about 16 or 17 years old. From the dishwashing, I went to work for Mr. Andreas, who had a business. In fact, he still has a parking lot by the Court House. I started working for him as a garage attendant, parking boy, and washing cars. I worked for him for about two years. He treated me pretty good. He was a very nice man. So from there, at one time they was hiring over in the Texas & Pacific Railways. I went and got a job as a laborer. I worked there till I went into the service. I worked about a year, then I got my "Greetings." I went in the service at Logan Heights, in Fort Bliss. From there I got transferred to Camp Maxie, Texas. That's where I got my basic training.

Q: What year was that?

S: 1942.

Q: You told me some interesting things about your military life. Was that at this time or later on?

S: It was at this time, when we were taking our basic training. They had a whole bunch of guys, all Mexican Americans, that used to be farm hands

around the Río Grande Valley. Some were from McAllen and all those parts down there. These guys were worse than I was because they couldn't speak English at all. They couldn't write or read. They wanted to keep them there, so they took smart guys like me [Taughter] who could understand English to train them. They gave us a rating of corporals to start with. [There was] me and one guy from San Pedro, California; a Puerto Rican from New York; one from San Diego, California--he was a second lieutenant at the time, [and became] the platoon leader. They made a platoon of nothing but Mexican-Americans. We had to train them; but we had to be trained ourselves [first], then we had to explain everything in Spanish to the others--how to do close order drill, how to dismantle the rifle, what they were supposed to do, even their general orders. They had to learn the general orders before they could get out of camp. We told them, "It's going to be hard." But one of the sergeants said, "[If they can learn at least three of the general orders], we can manage to give them passes." So they did, 'cause they wanted to get out of camp.

Q: Where is this Camp Maxie?

S: It's up in northeast Texas, this side of Hugo, Oklahoma. It's between Hugo and Paris, Texas.

Q: What about discrimination. Did you see any?

S: We had it up there. In the mess hall, they started serving family style. They would put all the food on the table and you'd serve [yourself] from there. Then all this Anglos started crying that our Mexican boys were starving them to death--that they didn't get a bite to eat because we ate everything. One time we had this NCO meeting. I told them, "Look, these guys, they don't ask to come over here, they were brought in here, so why the hell kick about it. If you get nothing to eat, that's your fault."

Get up there and beat them to the draw; that's the only way you're going to eat." So they had it! We used to have two sergeants who were the top ranking NCOs for our platoon. One was from Arkansas, the other from Oklahoma. They were mean son-of-a-guns. They used to treat us real bad for any little reason. We used to get KP or digging holes, or cleaning their quarters. For no reason at all, they would find something for us to do. And they used to call us all kinds of names.

Q: Do you remember any of the names?

S: "Chile beans," "taco frito," and what have you. They used to name us anything they could think of to discriminate us.

Q: How about in town when you went on pass?

S: In town, that was different, because they knew they would get beat up. Some guys didn't take too much of that stuff. I was getting tired myself. I didn't want to get into trouble; I was trying to do the best I could as an NCO. I got into fights all right, but I didn't get myself into no trouble in the company [where] I had to get court-martialed or anything like that.

Q: How about after basic training? Did the platoon go overseas as a group or did you get broken up?

S: When basic training was over, they tested us--I guess to see how much work we had done with these guys. They had their guys and also Mexican Americans mixed up with Anglos in the other companies. We were the first ones to get our awards because of the close ordered drills. They done it better than any other guys out there. They were pretty smart people; the only thing is that they couldn't read or write, but they could understand. If you showed them how to do something, they'd go out there and do it.

Q: I remember you telling me about one of these men being sick. Can you

remember that?

S: This guy used to be from McAllen, Texas. He was always with a cold and running a fever and all that, until finally they took him into the hospital. They kept him there for about a week. Then he came back with orders from the doctor that he shouldn't be out on the field drilling and training. They put him on light duty; according to them, it was a light duty job. He had to be a boiler-man, to keep four boilers /going/, because it was four barracks. He had to have those four boilers at night with a lot of coal so that they could keep those barracks warm in the winter time. He used to sleep the next day from about 6:00 in the morning till about noon, when he'd get up, eat lunch, then he'd do his duty around there--you know, as far as cleaning. He kept on like that for about three or four months. Finally, he ended up with a medical discharge.

Q: What happened to the rest of the men?

S: The rest of the men got scattered to different companies with the Anglos because they already knew how to do this and that. Also, some of them learned to speak a little English. We used to spend our time at night teaching them to read, write, and speak English. And some of the guys there got pretty good. We didn't speak it very well, but we taught them what we knew. They ended up in different companies and became pretty good soldiers. In fact, some came up with good decorations when we went overseas.

Q: Can you tell me anything interesting about when you were overseas--where you were and what you did?

S: We started in France, when they had the big invasion--D-Day. We started in Omaha Beach, and then we went through France, Belguim, /and/ Holland. We entered Germany right around Holland. We had hard winters, and hard battles. I was one of the lucky ones that was not touched by a bullet--

not because I was hiding (laughter), but because I was lucky.

Q: How long were you there?

S: In Germany, we stayed there about two years.

Q: Do you remember your outfit? What kind was it?

S: I was in the infantry in the 102nd Division, 407 Regiment. It was a rifle company. I was in the Heavy Weapon Company when they got me for the duty with the boys I was telling you about.

Q: How about the rest of the men? Did you see any of them?

S: The only one that I saw was one on the boat. His name was Rafael Treviño, from Victoria, Texas. This guy was happy-go-lucky--always singing, playing a little flute, and all that kind of stuff, you know, around the boat. One time I told him, "Goddamn, aren't you afraid that when you go overseas you'll get killed?" And he says, "Why? I shouldn't be afraid." He says, "Are you afraid?" I said, "A little bit." He says, "No, I never think that I'm going to die." Maybe that's what kept him so happy. But the poor guy, in the first encounter we had when we landed on Omaha Beach, he was cut across by machine gun fire. And that was the end of Rafael Treviño. Another one that I saw was Pablo Flores from El Paso. He also was killed over there. We used to go to school together in Beall. He was a neighbor of mine right across on Rivera Street. The rest of they guys, I saw very little of them. I saw another one when they pulled us out of the lines to go into town where they had these big coal mines. They had showers in there, and gave us clean clothes. His name was Daniel Ramírez from Río Grande City. He was telling me that he was getting along all right, and even thanked me for the training he got from us. And that's about all I remember of these guys.

At one time, Mother was very sick. They tried to get me back to the

States, but there was no way I could get home until the war was over. I was one of the first to come back, because I didn't come back with my outfit. I was put into a group of guys that were coming for the same purpose. The Red Cross had us there for emergency furloughs because we had parents that were sick. They didn't know if they were going to live long enough, so they wanted us to get back as fast as we could. We flew back from Paris.

Q: That takes care of your military career. How about your job now? What do you do here?

S: My job here is what they call a power-ground equipment mechanic. By power-ground, I mean I work on diesel generators to power the Hawk and Nike missiles' radars. As far as my training is concerned, I always liked to be a mechanic. When I was working at the service station, I started as a grease monkey; [that's] what they used to call it. It's what they call a greaseman now--lubricating cars. That's where I started learning about mechanics because I used to help this mechanic that used to work there. I had apprentice training when I worked for the railroads before I went in the service. I finished the apprenticeship when I came back and got to be an A-1 machinist in the shop where I used to work, TP. But when the diesel engines came out, they started RIFing out a lot of people; and that's when I got out of the railroad. I tried everything. I started working as a soda pop salesman, then bread salesman, later as beer salesman. That's what I liked the most--used to drink a lot of beer. I got tired of beer and went to work as a mechanic with Rollins Motor Company. That was around 1954. I started working there also as a lubrication man. And then from there I started working on the line; that's where I got back a little bit of my mechanic training. Of course, they

used to have some training programs there for the guys that want to learn and start on the line.

Finally, I ended up making an application for Civil Service. At one time I got called in and I neglected the application and I lost it. And where I was working for another dealer, when the Volkswagon started to come in, they sent me to school over to San Antonio, Texas, for three weeks' training. So I learned that Volkswagon pretty good. Finally, as the company stopped selling, they used to have different guys come around. We didn't get paid like we were supposed to. In fact, sometimes we'd be on commission, but sometimes they'd take us out of commission and put us on salary, then take us out of salary and put us back on commission and so on and so forth. I ended up with another application at Civil Service and finally got in. That was in 1966, and I've been here ever since, doing the same job.

Q: So you've been with the German school since 1966?

S: No, at first I was with the American school. I started at Tobin Wells. What I mean is, I was doing the same kind of work, because the Americans have the same kind of school. But they had a big RIF in 1970, and I went to work as radiator repairman in Shop 4 for DIO here in Fort Bliss. I was there two years. Then there was an opening in the German Air Force school doing the same work. I put in for this job, and I got it. Now I have put in for a different job. It pays a little better and this is for the Air Defense Board. I've been given pretty good chances of getting it. I hope so.

Q: As far as your formal education, you've only been to 7th grade. Have you had other type of education?

S: I used to get books from the library, like English, American History, and

Math. I used to study after work. When I was in the service, I had different schools and that helped me. In fact, here at Fort Bliss they told me I had an equivalent high school education on account of the schools I had in the service. I had NCO school, cooks & bakers school in San Antonio, and communications school to lay ground wire for radio and telephone. When they asked me how much school I had, I told them about all the schools I had, so they gave me an equivalent rating.

Q: Did they give you a diploma?

S: No. They told me I had to attend a five week school in Fort Bliss.

Q: Any other events that you might remember about the Depression or discrimination?

S: The only discrimination I can remember was when I was working at the railroad. The locker rooms, you know, they used to separate the Mexicans and colored guys in one section and the Anglos in another. And they used to have big signs there "For Whites," and then on the other side it said, "For Mexicans and Coloreds." They used to have it pretty bad when I was in the railroad.

Q: When was that--before or after the war?

S: That was before the war. And after the war it was just about the same.

Q: Ruben, you're a pretty big man. How tall are you?

S: I am six feet two inches. I weigh about 220 pounds.

Q: You were always a big man, so really nobody messed with you in school, as far as the Anglos go?

S: At Beall school, we didn't have very many Anglos; there was nothing but Mexicans. As far as I can remember, in my class there used to be only one little gringo there, one little "gringuito"; and he didn't mess with nobody 'cause he was a very little boy. He was a very good one.

Q: Where did you pick up your English that you used in the Army?

S: From school.

Q: Did everybody talk English at school?

S: No. They used to get after us because we spoke Spanish right outside of school. We had a guy in there as a coach. They told him they didn't want us to speak Spanish in the school grounds. We used to call him "el viejo" or this and that. He'd turn around and then he used to follow us. And finally, when he used to catch somebody, boy I'll tell you! He used to get a strap--you know, they used to have these long sticks with long straps--and right there he'd let him have it. And, oh, I had my strappings; I forgot to tell you about that. There was one little short teacher named Miss LaFarr. Boy, she used to be like a goddamn tiger! Every time she'd catch somebody, she was out there with that strap right on the back. And hit hard, she used to hit hard! One time she hit me so hard, that for three days I had big bumps on my back where she strapped me with that goddamn strap. Really, at that time they didn't fool around--they let you have it! I didn't see them do it with Anglos because we didn't have very many. Also that guy, you know, that used to be a coach out there, he used to beat them up--not with the hands, but with that strap; he really used to beat them. One time, this little teacher for no reason at all... Here's what happened, I can just look at myself so many years ago. I'll never forget this. I was at the blackboard, something she gave us for spelling. Somebody threw an eraser, and hit me on the head. When I turned around, I had the eraser in my hand, then she walks in! But another guy throwing the erasers hit her and then she thought I was the one. So she gave me a beating, and then she thought I was too big for her, so she sent me to the principal, Mrs. Pratter. She was a heavy set one, and boy, she really

dusted off my pants good and proper! Boy, I couldn't sit for a couple of days 'cause I was sore.

Q: How about your parents? Did they complain any?

S: I never did say anything to my parents about it. /Laughter/. I used to keep it to myself.

Q: Why didn't you tell your parents?

S: Because... I don't know; it was just one of those things. My kids are the same way. If something happens at school, I have to dig it out of them or find out from a different person or by the teachers themselves when they do something bad. But maybe I didn't tell them at all, because, eh, why should I worry my father and mother. And at that time, if they'd go complain, they would tell them, "Well, if you don't like it, you can take your kid out of school." They'd just throw you out. At that time, they didn't care whether you went to school or not!

Q: I know you have to go back to work. I want to thank you right now for giving me this interview in your lunch hour. Can you tell me your feelings about Chicano, or Mexican American, or the Mexican?

S: My feelings are that I am a Chicano. As they brought that word out, I don't know where they dug it out from, but I have heard a lot of stories about the word Chicano. My feelings are not hurt if you call me Chicano, Mexican, or Mexican American. I don't get hurt either way.

Q: So you really don't remember when you first heard the word Chicano?

S: No, not exactly. I used to hear it long ago, but when I heard the word Chicano, I used to think that they used this word in short for mexicano. That used to be my way of thinking. But as I have heard /the/ story about the word Chicano, well, /it/ sounds /like it/ comes from way, way back.

Q: How about at Sanderson? Well, you were real small then, but do you remember

hearing it down there?

S: No.

Q: How about in the Army?

S: In the Army, I used to hear it. They used to call us Chicano, Chicas Patas, all kinds of names, but we'd think nothing of it. I mean, as far as the origin of this word.

Q: Do you associate the word now with the Chicano Movement as being rebellious or as being anything contradictory to what you believe?

S: No. I think it's about time somebody gets up and thinks like they are thinking, because I don't want my family, both boys and girls, to pass through life the way I did. I want them to have a different life. So I don't feel hurt about it, no way!

Q: Tell me about your children. You told me some of your children are married now and are in California. What kind of a position do they have?

S: My daughter works at the Bank of California in San Francisco. My son-in-law is supervisor for John Hancock Insurance. The oldest is married, and is a teacher at Bassett School. The youngest is going to UTEP.