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Judge George Rodriguez, Sr.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Judge George Rodriguez, Sr. (1909-1980)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 19, 1977
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Judge of 168th District Court in El Paso.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Mexican Americans and the legal profession in El Paso in the 1930s; cases he fought as a criminal lawyer involving Mexican Americans; impact of wars on the Mexican American community; views on the Chicano Movement.

50 minutes, 18 pages

George Rodriguez Sr.
February 19, 1977
Interviewed by Oscar J. Martinez

M: This is an interview with Judge George Rodriguez Sr. of 401 San Saba Street, El Paso, Texas on February 19, 1977. Interviewing is Oscar Martinez, Department of History, University of Texas at El Paso. Judge we have information already from the previous interview that Richard Estrada did with you about your place of birth, and where you were born and your parents' background. Could you elaborate more about where you grew up?

R: Primarily in El Paso.

M: In El Paso. And you went to school here in El Paso?

R: Most of the time.

M: Can you tell me what schools you attended?

R: Grade school in El Paso, then my last year of high school I went to St. Mary's in San Antonio, Texas and then I took my law at University of Arizona.

M: Any particular experiences that stand out in your mind from your elementary school days here in El Paso?

R: Not particularly. In regards to what?

M: Oh, any interesting incidents, friends that you had, people who influenced you, outstanding teachers.

R: Well, I liked all of my teachers. I can recall some of them.

M: They influence you?

R: Yes. Miss Flick at Bailey School, Miss Rice at Lamar, Miss Bridges at High School, Mrs. Maud Issacks. There were several others whose name I can't recall. There were many.

Rodriguez

M: Maud Issacks, wasn't she a state representative from here?

R: She was later on.

M: When you were a little boy where you conscious of the need to succeed and make something of yourself in life. Did you have a need to achieve?

R: I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps if that's what you mean, in law.

M: In law.

R: My mother influenced me alot, she wanted me to get a higher education, I remember that.

M: Was your father pretty influential in steering you in the path of professions?

R: I would say so, yes.

M: You didn't go to high school here though, did you?

R: Yes, I did.

M: You went to high school here. Which high school?

R: El Paso High was the only one.

M: El Paso High. And you graduated from there?

R: No, I graduated from St. Mary's High School.

M: How long were you at El Paso High School?

R: About two and a half years.

M: At that time were there many Mexican Americans at El Paso High School?

R: It's hard to tell in proportion but I remember many, yes. That was the only high school. Naturally, I can't estimate the proportions, see, but being the only high school at that time I would imagine it had many Mexican American students, yes.

M: Was there much interaction between Mexican Americans and Anglo students at El Paso?

Rodriguez

R: Much what?

M: Interaction.

R: Not that I could notice. I grew up just as a normal kid, mixed into society without giving much thought to any distinction, I would say. In other words, nothing bothered me that is of conflict today. If you can follow what I'm trying to say.

M: Yes. Yes, I can.

R: I never gave it a thought.

M: What about the differences between the Mexican Americans who lived in South El Paso, or Chihuahuita and the Mexican Americans that lived in Sunset Heights, let's say, and in the El Paso High School area.

R: They were gangs that conflicted, yes. Childhood gangs, you know what I mean, that would fight. There was a distinction there, yes.

M: Were you ever involved in any of that.

R: Somewhat.

M: You recall any instances, any incidents that stand out in your mind?

R: Well, we would have fights between south El Paso and east El Paso and north El Paso or west El Paso but they were normal child play I suppose.

M: Why did you go to San Antonio, why didn't you finish at El Paso High?

R: Because my father got a job in Mexico City and so he wanted to put us in a boarding school. So all the children went to San Antonio. I got a sister that went to Incarnate Word college in San Antonio. My other brother who is a dentist graduated from Baylor in Dallas, Baylor University. My other brother went to Texas University, and then one with General Motors in Mexico City. That was the reason for the family split.

M: After high school did you come back to El Paso or did you go to law school after that or to college?

Rodriguez

R: I went to college in St. Mary's for two years, pre-law. Then I went to Tucson.

M: Then you came back to El Paso.

R: Then I came back to El Paso.

M: So you started your law practice here in El Paso?

R: That is right.

M: What year was that, Judge?

R: 1933.

M: 1933, that was during the Depression.

R: Very much so.

M: How was it starting to practice law in the middle of the Depression?

R: Very hard. There wasn't any money. Bread lines, poverty, everything was depressed.

M: Can you tell me your experiences in that kind of environment, trying to get started?

R: It was very hard for many reasons. The economic situation and that is where the racial imbalance comes in. It was hard for a Mexican American to get started in a profession at that time. It wasn't common, not like it is today anyway.

M: Where there other Mexican American lawyers?

R: Only Frank Galvan.

M: And what was he involved in? What kind of law?

R: Just, general practice, like myself. We started about the same time. There were others that came but left.

M: They left?

R: Yeah.

M: Why didn't they stay?

Rodriguez

R: Probably because of economics. Not too many, just about three or four.

M: At that time was there a legal association in El Paso? Lawyers group?

R: Yes, there were two or three.

M: Two or three different groups?

R: Yes.

M: Did you belong to any of them?

R: Not at that time.

M: Any particular reason why you didn't?

R: I got a pretty good idea, because I was Mexican American, in one organization.

M: Did you apply for membership.

R: No, 'cause I anticipated the result.

M: What about Mr. Galvan?

R: I would say he was in the same situation as I was.

M: He didn't belong to any organization.

R: No.

M: What about your clients, were they mostly Mexican, all Mexican?

R: Yes, mostly Mexican.

M: But you did have a few Anglo clients?

R: A few, yes.

M: Was the experience of Mr. Galvan the same, would you say, in that regard?

R: Yes, I would say so.

M: Were you involved in community activities at the time? With LULAC perhaps?

R: I was. Matter of fact I was President of LULAC at one time.

M: When was that? I didn't know that.

R: I would say in the forties. Yes, around that time.

Rodriguez

M: In doing some research I came across a leaflet put out by I don't remember whether it was LULAC but it was a community organization in the Mexican American community and Cleofas Calleros was very active in this organization and it had to do with discrimination against Mexican Americans in employment.

R: I remember he was very active in all that, yes.

M: You recall any incidents of that sort, any experiences that you might have been involved in?

R: I wasn't involved in any directly, no. I can't say that.

M: Or cases that you knew about? That the community was trying to rectify.

R: Well, probably as applicable to public jobs, it was generally conceded that a Mexican American could not be elevated to a public job. That was a matter in general or common knowledge, I would say. 'Cause the facts proved it there wasn't any.

M: Was it a matter of Mexican Americans not having the preparation, the education?

R: Partially. The other was somewhat a bias, I suppose.

M: Were you involved in any cases of people being repatriated or deported back to Mexico in the thirties, from El Paso?

R: Yes, several.

M: Could you tell me about some of those experiences?

R: Well, they were all hardship cases. Some of them I lost. I remember one old man who had lived here all of his life, he was accused of running a bawdy house in Balmonhea, Texas or a little town near there, Zaragosa I believe. I can't recall his name right now, but he had all American children and worked for the Texas and Pacific Railway all of his life. He made a little money down there and opened a bar and was accused of

Rodriguez

hiring out prostitutes, which is a deportable offense and one that you cannot come back into the country once you're deported. We took that case all the way to Washington and lost it. I thought it was a very cruel and inhuman to have deported him but it was really a hardship case. That's one that stands out and there are several others.

M: He was a non-citizen?

R: He was an alien.

M: He was an alien.

R: But a resident alien.

M: Any others like that, that you'd like to tell me about?

R: I can't recall of any because I had pretty good luck in keeping most of them here. I'm sure there are many others.

M: Were you here during Prohibition?

R: Yes.

M: You recall any interesting experiences that you might of had during that time?

R: Tried several bootlegging cases if that's what you mean.

M: Did you? (Laughs)

R: And murders. Battles on the Rio Grande.

M: Could you elaborate on the more interesting ones?

R: Probably the most interesting one was the Galvan case that killed a Border Patrol man in a gun battle at San Elizario, across from Clint, I believe. Killed (), who was a football player and a hero at El Paso High and later become a Border Patrol man. They supposed to have shot him in ambush, in a battle between the United States Border Patrol and the Mexican smuggler. Galvan was on horseback, they all were. We tried the case in 34th District Court and he got the death penalty. But

Rodriguez

that death penalty, we appealed it and it was affirmed and the governor of Texas through the intervention of many prominent Mexican citizens here took up a collection, petitions, probably from all parts of the world, and the sentence was commuted to life. Galvan now has a butcher shop in Juarez and I have seen him still alive. It was pretty interesting.

M: Yes, it sounds interesting. Where is his butcher shop?

R: It's near the old city market but I can't tell you the exact location, but I've seen him.

M: What's his first name?

R: Raul

M: Raul.

R: Raul Galvan.

M: And when did the case take place?

R: About 1939.

M: 1939.

R: The killing was before that, that was the trial date. The killing must have been in '29 or '30.

M: Why did it take so long to bring him to trial?

R: I don't know. I may not be exact on my dates. I can look it up in the reporter though, and tell you exactly.

M: Any other cases that are interesting like that, that you remember? Back then or more recently.

R: They're all interesting to me. I've tried about 125 murder cases, defending. A political case that was moved from Van Horn, it happened in Van Horn. That was a racial incident where, I can't think of the man's name, the defendant, but he killed a former partner of his that was County Judge, wherein he thought he was being deprived of some of his rights in

Rodriguez

the mine. He killed him in cold blood in the main highway in Van Horn. We tried five times to get a jury in Van Horn but every panel disqualified, they had some prejudice or bias. Finally Judge W.D.() moved the case to El Paso in his own motion and we tried it here. That man is still living and he came to visit me the other day in my office. He wanted to go back to the penitentiary, says the best years of his life were spent there. And he asks me, he says, "How can I get back?". I said, "Well you've got to commit a crime to get back and be sentenced.". He says, "Well, I want to go back to get my teeth fixed and I need an operation.". He says, "I can't get it any place except at Huntsville." I don't know if he ever made it back or not, I haven't seen him since.

M: You don't know where he lives?

R: He lives in El Paso.

M: Where (inaudible).

R: I'm trying to think of his name. I'll recall in a minute because this is too far back.

M: When did that trial take place?

R: Probably in the fifties.

M: (Any others?)

R: There's alot of them. Every one's a history in itself.

M: That's right.

R: Full of human emotion.

M: You have records of all these cases in your files?

R: Not all of them. The District Attorney probably has.

M: Did you ever try any civil rights cases.

R: No.

M: It sounds like you specialized in criminal cases.

Rodriguez

R: I did.

M: You did.

R: There wasn't any civil rights cases in those days, very few. That's a new innovation.

M: When you were in high school, did you go to Juarez much?

R: No, I can't say that I did, but Juarez was a social center at that time. Before that time the society of El Paso would celebrate in Juarez on social events. Like they had big dances at the Alana.

M: On Diez y Seis de Septiembre?

R: Many other times, there were. The elite of El Paso would mix with the elite of Juarez and have their dances and parties over there. Like one big family. Strict immigration laws was developed later. The hard feelings developed later on, I'll put it that way.

M: How did the Mexican Revolution affect your family, Judge? Or did it?

R: No, because we already were over here. But like Chichauita those were all refugees from the Mexican Revolution. They came over because of that, you know, Upson Street and that section of town, Porfirio Diaz and that, you know, Mundy Heights. They came over on account of the revolution, to flee in other words.

M: Did World War I affect your family?

R: Not particularly, other than the way it affected everybody.

M: What about the 1918 Spanish influenza?

R: I was here, I saw the dead bodies driving down Boulevard, every day of the year. Army funerals. I lived on Boulevard at that time which is now Yandell. There was cortege, cortege, you know funeral processions every day. It was bad. Thereafter, El Paso has always been a tubercular center. Most people came out here because of chest complications. You

Rodriguez

go into a theater everyone was coughing, or in a church. Highland Park was full of tuberculars. Of course, that was done away with. They've found a cure for it. But that influenced El Paso greatly, greatly, medically and otherwise, socially and economically.

M: Did you have relatives or friends who were affected by the flu who died?

R: I can't remember any. I know lots of lawyers that came out here for their health and got cured or at least their cases were arrested. They lived and practiced, many of them. Most of the old timers, I'd say came for that reason.

M: Do you think World War II made a difference in the socio-economic status of the Mexican American community?

R: It started there. Not as much as World War II but it had an impact, yes, very definitely.

M: How do you see that impact?

R: Well, whenever people travel and go to other parts of the world and see how other nations live, they come back here and it tends to blend people just like World War II did. All the soldiers that went all over the world, came back here and they become more broad-minded. That's what happens, a better understanding of the various cultures and the history of people. World War I started that trend, very definitely. That's why I say this is all a social revolution and it evolved from many sources, probably from wars. I'd say that's true of all mankind, that's true of all war.

M: War seems to be a catalyst for change. In the time that you lived here in El Paso, and the peso devaluations that have taken place over the years, how have you been affected, Judge? Or has it made any difference?

R: Personally it's made no difference to me. Of course, I'm not in

Rodriguez

business, I'm not a merchant. I'm sure it affects merchants, yes, economically and overall it probably has but I haven't noticed it, as such. It has a great impact on people wanting to come over here and work and all that, yes. I can see that, it's happening today.

M: Do you have any friends who are merchants who have been affected by the peso devaluation?

R: I know them all. South El Paso Street, Stanton Street, Santa Fe, all of them have been affected, Overland Street, San Antonio Street, very much. It's bad.

M: Would you say that the 1976 devaluation, this current one that were still having, is similar to what happened in 1954, the impact?

R: Somewhat, yes. This is more severe, I think, but the Depression, that's something else. The Depression was bad. We had bread lines and everything and we didn't feel it as much as other parts of the country because we're the last to feel it, particularly because of Juarez. See you could go over there and buy things. The shortages were not as significant here as in other parts of the country. We're the last to feel any depression.

M: Did you, yourself, go to Juarez to buy groceries over there?

R: Sometimes, yes, surely.

M: Was it common practice to do that?

R: Yes, I would say so.

M: You recall any problems at the bridge bringing things back?

R: Yes. It's harrassment, to some extent. It's bothersome, let me put it that way.

M: You recall any specific incidents where you were harrassed or bothered?

R: Not myself, no. Other than trivial, you know, common ordinary search.

M: What is your opinion about the Chicano Movement, Judge?

R: I don't know how to answer that. If you could give me a specific question. That's too general.

M: Well, the Chicano Movement started sometime in the latter sixties with the youth who adopted this term Chicano and also adopted aggressive means trying to initiate changes in the society and this is of course different from what the Mexican American community had done previously. So, I'm referring to that aspect.

R: Well, I think the blacks led the way, they run the interference. We copied them for the purpose of identity. In other words, what I think is that when the blacks wanted to be called blacks instead of negroes or colored they did it with the view in mind of securing their identity and so we followed suit. The word "Chicano" is used primarily to have an identifying body in the masses, see, because to say Latin American was to cover a multitude of sins, it wouldn't mean anything in the masses. But when you single out a word, we'll use the word "Chicano", just pick it out of thin air, it creates a symbol of identity. But I think the negroes or the blacks run the interference. They set the pattern and they've progressed more than anyone, quickly, more rapidly than any other race. We're adopting or perhaps what has happened in other parts of the country, like the Italian Movement, or the German movement or any of them, with the purpose of solidarity or unification, to count, in other words. That's what I think about it.

M: It sounds as you see it as a good thing?

R: Yes, otherwise you can't identify yourself for progress 'cause you're lost in inertia.

M: Judge, I want to turn to the subject of politics and ask you why is it,

Rodriguez

in your opinion, that Mexican Americans have had such little representation in politics, in El Paso. Recently we've had more representation but let's say prior to the late sixties, there was very little representation. How do you explain it?

R: One of the reasons was the poll tax. Mexican Americans would not buy their poll tax and lack of unity, again, lack of a concerted effort. I'm talking about elective offices now. The appointed offices we've always had a pretty good share. The records will show it.

M: To what do you attribute that disunity?

R: Because of our nature. A prominent District Judge here one time told me one time, he says, "I don't care how the south side goes, I'll get the north side and I'll split the south side, so I'll be elected.", you see. We never have stuck together. So it didn't make any difference on an Anglo running what the south side did. I'm using the word south side as a...see they would split so what difference did it make. Now it's a little different. The poll tax was a very important element and factor in the matter. Of course, when that was abolished it gave the Mexican American more of an opportunity to assert himself. That's one of the main reasons.

M: Was there any effort in the Mexican American community to get rid of the poll tax?

R: Yes, oh yes.

M: How far back did these efforts go?

R: The blacks started it, when they were permitted to vote in the Democratic primaries. Then the thing evolved to the abolishment of it, that was a beginning. And another thing that's very significant in my mind and something that is hard to say. We're all of a jealous nature, you see.

Rodriguez

The minute a Mexican American gets some place, everyone criticizes him instead of helping him, try to degrade him. That's based on the same principle as, "Why do you have so many revolutions in Mexico?", "Because everyone wants to be general.". That's our basic inherent disquality, I guess you'd call it.

M: Where does it come from?

R: Hard to say. I think it's the Latin nature. We're just envious of each other. It's a bad quality but it exists, I think.

M: Do you think the Anglo is not that way?

R: Not nearly as much as we are. Or the news media is trying to make it that way, now. That's another thing. (Chuckles)

M: What makes the Anglo people not as jealous of each other as the Latin people, in your view?

R: It's just the make up of a Latin, the emotional part, our mental and philosophical views, it's hard to explain, but you've often heard that a Latin is more hotheaded. What makes him more hotheaded, I can't explain it but it exists. () from that a little bit.

M: Let me ask you a final question, Judge. In your opinion, has the Mexican American community here made significant progress in recent years?

R: Definitely, yes sir. I agree with that in many, many respects.

M: And to what do you attribute that progress?

R: A united effort brought about by education and a blending of ideas. Go back to World War II, that started it. It just caused people to know each other better, understanding. Of course, our young people are better educated, have more opportunity. Probably, and I'm guessing at this 'cause I don't know what other people think, but it could be said generally that the Mexican American was inferior from a mental capacity,

Rodriguez

which is not true, but now they're proving otherwise by education. They're just as capable of learning as anyone but perhaps the other idea prevailed in times gone by. I think we're getting away from that.

M: You think in the future the Mexican American community can expect better things?

R: I think so.

M: You're optimistic?

R: Yes, very much so. We've got good potential. You know, if you go back in history, real far back I'll say, we adopted a lot of the Spanish habits or customs which are bad. Instead of adopting the good things we adopted the bad things like the mordida in Mexico, you know and stuff like that, which originated in Europe, but Mexico brought it over, you know, and it's bad. It hits at the very core of honesty, and we're getting away from that. What I'm trying to say is that you've got to think with integrity, otherwise you can't progress and I'm optimistic about that. If you're dishonest in your thinking, I don't care what the ethnic background is you're not going to succeed. It will catch up with you. That's where we got a little bit of a failing.

M: But things are improving in your view?

R: I think so.

M: Well, I want to thank you very much, Judge for this very interesting conversation, for giving me your time.

R: I may not be right on everything but I'm not too far off.

M: I think you've said some significant things.

R: We've got to get away from so much opposite thinking, you know that, we've got to think alike, all peoples. But it's very hard to blend peoples of different backgrounds, you know, that's hard. But we do a

pretty good job here in El Paso. Here's another thing, in parting. All Mexican Americans, for the lack of a better word: I'll use that word, they are different in Los Angeles, they are different in New Mexico, they are different in El Paso, they are different in San Antonio, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley. In our methods and our ways of living, we have different customs. In and among ourselves we differ. Take a Los Angeles Mexican, he is much different from an El Paso Mexican American or Lower Rio Grande Valley. Generally they're the same, but little things, you know, little methods of speech, colloquialisms, everything else is different, even the way we live. El Paso has been one of the hardest places on the border, I think, to assimilate into the races, into the whole picture, but we're getting there.

M: Why is that?

R: Probably because we're so close here and isolated in a way, isolated geographically and yet so close to Mexico. Well New Mexico...the Spanish influence is great there, from the old country. Here in El Paso, the people that came here, outside of what we talked about on the Mexican Revolution, they were mostly laborers that came here because of economic reasons. I would say that some of them was not the better element, you know what I mean? Working class, but they came because of dire need but those people are getting educated. They're the ones who are profiting more and more because of the movement. The lower classes, let's put it that way. The upper classes always had a chance.

M: You're right.

R: It's the lower classes that have to be uplifted and they're the ones who are benefiting. That's the sum and substance of it.

M: Well, did you want to add something?

Rodriguez

R: No, no just thinking outloud.

M: I want to thank you very much again for your time.

R: It's been a pleasure.

(End of interview)