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Interview no. 709

Customs Inspector

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Anonymous
INTERVIEWER: Emilia Rodríguez
PROJECT: Class project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 25, 1978
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 709
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 709

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

An everyday person who has found a rewarding job through his efforts.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

His personal experience while growing up; his efforts in search of a better working position and his accomplishments.

Length of interview: 35 minutes Length of transcript: 18 pages

Anonymous
by Emilia Rodríguez
April 25, 1978

R: When and where were you born?

A: I was born in Junction, Texas, July 31, 1934.

R: Were your parents from El Paso?

A: No, they were not. My parents came over from México.

I remember my mother telling me of my grandfather when they came over. They had to pay a nickle to come across. There was not passports or papers to show. However you did have to pay I think a nickle. I remember that my mother told me that my grandfather had to go borrow the nickle, he did not even have that.

R: Do you know why they came over to El Paso?

A: No, not that I can really recall. During that time times were even harder in México then in the U.S. My grandfather could not find any work at all. They came over in search of employment and I guess for better conditions to live in.

R: What part of town did you grow up in?

A: I grew up in Junction, Texas. Most of my young life was spent there. I went to school there, I was born there, I grew up there, and from there I went to the service. The town was typical, I guess you could call it Mexican American and Anglo town. It was separated, of course. We lived about a mile and a half from the main part of town, and it was called el barrio. There were 100 percent Mexican American who lived there. There was one man, merchant, who had a little store, and he more or less controlled everything around there. Instead of us going to town, we bought from him. And being a

merchant he did not have any competitors, so all his items were higher in price. As a result some of us still had to go to town and we had to walk, because there was no public transportation, to buy things that we needed for our household.

R: Did you like school or did you participate in any activities?

A: I enjoyed the school to some extent. Of course first went in I did not know the difference of being separated or segregated, other than in the school that I was in. The very first room that I was in there was nothing but Mexican Americans. Later as I progressed through school, I found out that it wasn't till the third grade that we got integrated.

As I grew up and went to school, I participated in sports because I liked them ever since I was a little kid. We played ball in the regular lot that we made for playing ball. The only thing that I can remember is when we used to go play other teams and the other teams also had Mexican American guys, and we used to hear comments like, "Let's go out and kill those damned Mexicans." Then we got to thinking that they fell in the same category. It was okay as long as they used us to play. Some of our guys were good and some of them went out to make all district and all state.

We could not get a haircut in town because they would not let us because we were Mexicans. So we had our own barber who came from San Antonio every two weeks. He came down

since he grew up in Junction and also he knew what the problem was. The activities in school were somewhat limited because the school was small, but we did play football, baseball or softball, volleyball and things like that. I got expelled once for getting in a fight with an Anglo guy. Needless to say the Anglo guy did not get expelled and I was the only one who got kicked out of school. The fight was because they did not let us use the basketball, they felt they owned it, and it was the school property. Yet the superintendent, who later committed suicide, did expell me and that angered me somewhat. At any rate I did finish school.

R: As a teenager how did you spend your weekends?

A: Well, there was not much to do in Junction. The church activities were limited. We did attend all the dances around there. We used to go about 100 miles to a dance, up to Sonora and Ozona. Other than that we used to go to the movies, play softball and baseball, and also go to other towns to play ball. We used to go fishing a lot, the river was just about a quarter mile from my house. So I used to walk down there and go swimming, and that was about it.

R: So you say that you joined the service right after you graduated from high school?

A: I graduated in May and stayed around town because this lady that my father used to work for owned a flower shop. And so when I graduated from school she wanted me to work

for her. She paid me around \$16.00 dollars a week.

That was the only job I had there in Junction. As soon as February came around, I told the lady I was going to join the service because there was nothing else to do there in Junction.

R: What branch of the service did you join?

A: I joined the Air Force. I thought that since I was probably going to be drafted, I did not want to go in the Army.

R: When you were in the Air Force, were you sent to El Paso or how is it that you came here?

A: I went to Lackland for training. At that time you went for three months. I finished there and after basic training, I got sent to radar school in Denver, Colorado for about six months. After we finished, we had a choice to put in for a base that was a SAC base which was Strategic Air Command. A lot of guys from there were Mexican American who put in for bases close to the border, because again, for the Mexican American being greater numbers and wanted to be close to people we could understand better in our own language. I put in for El Paso and got it. That was my first choice. Of course when I got here I did not experience all that much difficulty because I felt right at home, but of course El Paso is much bigger.

R: How old were you when you got married?

A: I was 22 years and my wife was 20.

R: Were you still in the Air Force?

A: Yes, I was still in the Air Force. I think I got here in

January 1956 and I married my wife in September 1957.

R: So you did experience some discrimination while growing up back home?

A: Yes. The town, if you have never been to that part of Texas, is a red-neck town, even worse back when I was growing up than now. There was just a bunch of stompers who owned everything, except for that Mexican American who had a little store, and they could care less if we went to the stores or not. They really did not care, the only thing they wanted you for was to work in their ranches and do their work, and they did not pay enough.

You could not get a haircut in town and the restaurants that were there at that time frowned on really serving you. They mostly wanted you to eat in the kitchen. We never had that much of a problem because we did not have money to go to the restuarants anyway. It was really the other places that I went to like San Angelo that I noticed that the people were even worse because they did not care for the Mexican Americans or for the service man.

R: When did you decide to make El Paso your home?

A: After my wife and I were married, our first child was born a year after, and I was sent overseas for a year. I came back and was separated from the service. I did not want to go back to Junction because I did not want to make \$50.00 dollars a week, if I made that much. There is nothing to go back to Junction. Even though, I like that

little town, I guess part of me will always be back there. There is nothing there to do, no industry, no jobs, and there is nothing there for your children to be exposed to.

R: Did you decide to look for employment here or did you attend school?

A: I had to get a job. I was overseas when I was discharged or separated and I really did not have a job. I came back to El Paso and started looking, and after a month I found one which paid \$275.00 per month. That was the only thing that I could find. I did not want to work in a gas station or in a factory.

R: How did you get interested in your present job?

A: Well, I started taking some federal entrance exams, and I flunked the first two that I took because for me they were hard. Finally I passed the third time that I took it. When you do that, that opens a whole lot of doors because you get on the federal register. They did not tell me that in the Civil Service Commission, but I found out after I talked to some other people. I went to work for the Army here in White Sands, then I transferred to Fort Bliss. From there I took another entrance exam and I passed it and got on the federal register again. This time I got offers from Washington as a research assistant, from the Department of Education, Department of Labor, the Department of Transportation. This was after I had taken this exam, and this is what you need to do to open these

doors for you. You need to take some of these exams to be put in the federal register and from there you will be called. Since I was a veteran, I had preference over others that were not veterans. I first went to work for the Civil Service Commission with the Social Security Administration, and then I transferred to Customs.

R: How long have you been working at Customs or are you still working there?

A: Yes, I am still working there. I started working the March of 1973, but before I could get into Customs, I had to go to San Isidro because there was the only place that had openings at the time. So I started working in California, Chula Vista, which is San Ysidro across from Tijuana. I worked there for about a year until I could transfer to El Paso. I might say this, that the people here are more friendly. The people in California are more on the defensive, more hostile. They seem to be in another world.

R: How long have you been down here in El Paso?

A: I have been working here in El Paso as a customs inspector since about October, 1973 until the present day.

R: When did you first develop any impression of Juarez or El Paso?

A: When I got here in January of 1956, of course like any other young man I wanted to go across the border and I did. Really I could not, they were just like

twin cities. I mean you step from this side to the other side. The only difference I could tell back then was that the places back there could stay open all night, while in El Paso the places closed down around eleven. You could tell the difference in the people over there. Even though we are Mexican Americans and our background is that our parents came over from Mexico, life over there has a distinctive style. People are always in the streets, singing, always having a good time. There is always places open where you can eat, like stands in the streets. While over here the people tend to get in their homes and more individual like, and the people over there were out on the streets.

R: Have you found your present job rewarding?

A: I think so. I think that I have done my share towards helping some of the Mexican Americans getting a fair treatment, that is to say people that come across and have to pay duty in some of those items. I have helped some of them at least with information that they had not bothered to find out before going over there or explained to them in a way that they went away with a peace of mind or a satisfactory answer. I have had several people come and tell me that at least I took the time to explain to them why this was done and why this was not done, or why they were charged duty when they should not have, mainly because they did not bother to find out and maybe

the inspector did not tell them. I think that working there when people come in the line and see that we are Mexican Americans, some of those people resent us because they say we check the Mexican American people harder than we do the Anglo. Maybe some of these people fit the pattern, we have to check. I mean if you come across in a nice suit and if you are a Mexican American or Anglo, chances are you will probably not get checked. But if an Anglo comes across there that is dirty and hippy type person, he just falls in a category that will get checked more often, and he is going back to secondary for further inspection. Same thing applies to the Mexican American. If he comes through there in a presentable way I personally will not send him back to secondary as opposed to a person who came by there with dirty and hippy type; again, he will fall into the same category. But yet just because you do have a suit on, it does not mean you will not get checked.

R: Do you feel you have changed in any way because of your job?

A: I guess I have. If I told you I had not I would not be telling the truth. I guess because I have been discriminated against a lot when I was growing up it has left some permanent scars on me that will never go away. I think I will never let them go away. But I have changed, we all do. As we get older you see things a different way,

you are more calm towards people, you try to explain to them, at least as my job goes. The situation that they are involved in is sometimes hard to explain. Sometimes, the inspector there does not speak any English and as a result we all tend to change a little bit. The longer we stay there, sometimes we change for the worse because some people who come through there are not the best people in the world. But some of the ones who come through there are nice people who have to shop over there because of the high price we have here.

R: Because of the time you have being there, can you tell more or less the people who are honest or who are not?

A: I tell you, we get taken every day. Because any time that you have people that are making decisions you are going to make mistakes, I don't care how good you are. People that just come across and put on an honest face will probably psyche you out. They might not be bringing back contraband but they might be bringing back birds, fruits and things that are prohibited in that way. Or things that they haven't bothered to find out they can be brought across that they don't know, so they try to sneak them across. Like cigarettes and sugar, a while back. They go over there and bring stuff back across that they can and they try to sneak it across.

Once you do that it becomes a contraband.

R: What happens to a person that tries to pass things or fruit like mangos that you can't bring across and get caught for the first time?

A: Usually if they have been doing it all along, they will not tell you they have been doing it all along. They are going to say it is the first time. So if it is only a few, they will give you a sermon and take them away. Really, they will show you the disease that can be brought over. If you have a lot of mangos or fruit that you are trying to bring back across that is illegally, that is contraband of course, then they fine you. It is never over three dollars on a fine like that, not unless you have a whole lot of them. Then it can go up to ten or fifteen dollars.

R: Can you tell me of any event or incident of interest that has happened to you since you have been working there?

A: There has been several, I guess the most has been life threatened. When I started working in San Ysidro the people there like I told you were more hostile, more in the defensive. The people over there are involved in drug smuggling more than they are here, as far as I am concerned. People over there were ready to fight it out with you, I don't mean by fists, but by guns. One day we were checking cars in San Ysidro and this person

had a carload of marijuana. When he came through the line with the load the inspector was just a little suspicious because the man was a bit nervous. This gave the inspector a suspicion to check the trunk. This man sped off and as he did he took out a gun and started shooting. And some of us that were standing there close to the area where others cars being checked, we did not know what was happening. It took us by surprise. You react, but you react in a different way than if somebody was actually pointing a gun at you. We knew the shots were in our direction, but we did not know which way to duck because they were just all over the place. The man went back to Mexico. The border there in California and Tijuana, is a little different than here, there is no bridge like here, there is just a fence, like. But of course, those were open during the day, they are open 24 hours, and people can go back and forth. It is much easier for people to go back or run back than it is here, because here the bridge is a little more congested than it is over there. That is one of them; there has been several as far as our lives are in danger.

R: So no one was really hurt?

A: In that particular incident no one was hurt, we were all lucky that the man was just...maybe he wasn't trying to hit us, maybe he was just trying to scare us so he could go back into Mexico.

R: Which border crossing do you like to work in the most here in El Paso?

A: Here in El Paso, the people that cross in the Santa Fe bridge, the people that cross in the Cordova and the people at the Zaragoza or Ysleta are a world of difference in those three bridges.

The people in the Santa Fe bridge are fayuqueros, most of them. Not all of them of course, because I have crossed through there myself. The reason I do that is because I'd rather pay the ten cents than wait in line for thirty minutes on the other free bridge. People are funny, they'd rather stand in line than to pay the ten cents. So as a result, the people that cross the Santa Fe bridge are people who are bringing back things from their shopping. These people walk across, they go over there to get their groceries and things and they'd rather come back through this bridge because they live around the south El Paso area. The people that are fayuqueros cross there because it is easier for them to come from the other parts of town to get to where they have their crossings already arranged from the people on the other side, and they cross through there. The Santa Fe is one way coming this way, but they get their crossings arranged through the people when they go back on the Stanton bridge. They will have their crossings already arranged so there will be no delay. We get a lot of the poor people that come through that

bridge.

People that come through Cordova are more affluent, the people that have just been out there for relaxation. A lot of Anglo people from here go eat over there, go dance and just for sightseeing and relaxation. We get all the tourist come through that bridge.

The people who come through the Zaragosa are just the local people that just like going back and forth. To them gas really does not mean too much. Because when I have been working over there, I know that I can tell people just go back two or three times a day when I am there just to ride. They want to get out of the house to buy some tortillas, etc. They just like to go back and forth just for the heck of riding.

R: Do you feel that the Carter proposal to stop the illegal aliens will really work?

A: No, I think that will just serve as kindling to a fire that will bring more people, because I think that if I were them I would try my darndest to get over here. That is what those people are doing. If they find out that Carter will give these people that have been over here, status, then they are going to do the same thing. And if they are going to do the same thing, there will be people over there ready to make money off of that people

because they are going to sell them packages like receipts, which will be false. It is just like selling them a mica to get across and work over here, which will be no good, and they alter [it]. Some, to say, will get away with it because if you don't have people trained to look at those documents and to tell the difference, then those people are going to be home safe. But they will be having to pay a price for it. The people that are going to get hurt are those people who will have to pay that price say two, three, or five hundred dollars, whatever the barrier will bear for that package. Then he gets caught and he is out that money, and he is out of the country. I don't feel that is a way out. Of course I can't tell which is the way out but I don't think that will help. I think that will even make it worse.

R: In your opinion how can we solve the problem of illegal aliens?

A: There are several, I am pretty sure, answers that people in Washington have been working with. However, I think the main one would be where you get to the people that employ these illegal aliens, the people that knowingly hire these people. They go and the border patrol or immigration will go and raid these places, and they go right back that day or the following day, these same

people will be working there. I think that if you get to the employer and charge him a one hundred a day or two hundred dollars for every employee that he has in there illegal and tell him, "Look, don't hire this employee because he is an illegal alien," and if he goes back there days later and he still has him there or is still working there, I think that employer should be fined, and not only fifty or one-hundred dollars. I think that is one way that you can get at these people. Perhaps another is to hire more agents to do more intensive searches of the places that hire, like the manufacturing or restaurants, construction works especially, to go up there and tell them, "Listen, these people are illegal aliens, they can't work. You have to go to the Employment Commission to get your employment and therefore hire people that are here and paying taxes, to work." I think that is another way, by hiring more agents to do more extensive work, more examination of places where employments are held. This is where people go work, especially in construction, restuarants and manufacturing. Wherever people employ a great amount of people, that your chances of finding illigal aliens is going to be there. I don't think that by building a fence or anything like that is going to work. Perhaps a progarm worked out between the two governments also whereby you would bring

people to special jobs that these people over here did not want to do. But there again, if these people did not want to do it and if those people are on welfare, they should be taken off, especially if there is an employment for them available. Some of those things, like I said I am pretty sure they will come up with something, but I think one of the main things perhaps is finding the employer that knowingly hires these people. I think that the employer has a fair chance to tell the difference between a Mexican American that is living here and a person that comes across the border. Now if that person that comes across the border with papers, I think the employer has the right to go ahead and employ that person. He is not trained as an inspector to see if the documents are in order or not. That is up for the agents to do, and I think it would be to our benefit. When I say "us" I mean people of Hispanic background. If we don't have documents how often do we go to the registrar and just forget it. We should get them, and then if they ask us then present them. That doesn't mean we should be carrying them around, but if you go for employment you need to take your social security card, you need to take something to write with. I think this document would be something that if you need it for work or a driver's license when

they stop you for a check, you have to present those documents. And now they make them in a small form and you don't have to carry them around with you. I would carry them around with me if my English wasn't too good. But if I spoke just as good as anyone else, I would not carry nothing if I did not feel like it. But I think those documents would benefit us especially when people go ask for employment. If they want to see them, well, show it to them and just put it at the house for safe keeping. Some of those things I am pretty sure can work out, and I think we need to because our economy is not in the best of shape. And it is us, the people of the working class, that pay the taxes.