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Rosa Guerrero

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Rosa Guerrero
INTERVIEWER: Vicki L. Ruiz
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 30, 1985
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Folklórico dance instructor.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Experiences at Texas Women's University at Denton in 1953;
Experiences at Texas Western College in the 1950s; her work
in South El Paso; the significance of UTEP to the El Paso
community.

Length of interview: 25 minutes Length of transcript: 19 pages

Rosa Guerrero
by Vicki L. Ruiz
January 30, 1985

R: I know you don't like to relive unpleasant memories, but I would like to ask you about your days in Denton at Texas Women's University and why did that experience sort of led you to decide to go to Texas Western?

G: Well, I think there were two or three different alternatives. I didn't feel too comfortable over there. It was an excellent school, but I missed the heritage, I missed my family, I missed everything that was surrounding my life, you know. But another thing, I was going to get married, you know, and my husband says, "I'm going to leave El Paso and go to Torreón or I'm going to leave El Paso and go to Cleveland, Ohio. I don't have anybody here." To this day, he stil doesn't have anybody here. So I said, "Well, what shall I do? If I go back," I said, "would you let me finish school? That's my most important thing. I want to finish college so badly. I just want to prove to myself and to my family and to everybody that I can do it." And he says, "Oh, yeah, that's no problem. We will work it out together." That was another thing, I got married.

But that was the first time, I think in '53, that I felt very much alone, you know, and I'm a very, very sociable person. And I felt that you encountered discrimination in different ways and it was either you're going to be accepted or not, you know, in whatever level you go into. But I was so strong and so determined to finish and all that. Yet, I felt very weak over there. I felt like a little puppy dog with a bunch of wolves. I don't know why. I

really felt real bad and I felt that I wasn't important enough. I had a series of different injuries. I had torn ligaments on my right ankle and so I was made the percussionist of the group, of the dance group. Then I had a broken toe on my left foot, and then I developed sinuses. And I had never had those things, you know. I had always thought I was the strongest Amazon Chicana in existence.

But, you know, you go into life and I don't care how young you are or how old, there's always somebody that's going to be better than you. So in the dance field I saw the greatest dancers. I felt that maybe in my high school years, as I was recollecting, all these past few days and years, how in El Paso High [in] my sophomore, junior and senior year I was developed to a leader, and maybe I got that over-superior attitude, and then when I went over there I was nothing, I was starting from the bottom. And I was called, the counselor, Dr. McGee or Miss McGee, called me. I remember she says, "You're too bossy. The people don't like you. Besides, you're Mexican and you're not supposed to talk to them like that." (Chuckles) And you know, that shocked me, and I said, "I don't think I'm bossy. I'm just a leader." (Chuckles) I felt that I was a leader already, you know, years back. I didn't care whether I was good or bad or short or tall or black or white, I was a leader. But many of my teachers had developed that ability and they said I was good. And sometimes you do get this super ideology that you are the greatest, all of us. Your parents do that to you and nobody can

touch you, and maybe I had that. And it was a hard knock and it was good for me, though, in a way.

But I thought Denton at that time was a beautiful little city. It had North Texas on one side, and it was Texas State College for Women when I went. And a very unified school. But I said, "I wouldn't like to continue here because I'm missing the coeducational experience. I'm missing the interrelationship with the male that is supposedly a part of life and part of any standard of living anywhere that you live." I don't know, I didn't like the very, very jock type of physical educators. You know, I'm a girl and I'm a woman, I'm very proud of that. I'm very proud of being a wife and a mother, and I didn't like the physical education majors so jockey and so masculine, and horrible things that I saw that I don't want to even remember, you know. But of course, that's why one of the reasons I didn't send my daughter over there. I sent her to Texas Tech in Lubbock and then she finished over here, because Texas Tech had a good dance department. UTEP still doesn't have a good dance department. They're still in the Middle Ages, they're way over. (Chuckles) I'm sorry.

R: I wanted to ask you, so you got married and you started going to Texas Western your sophomore year?

G: Yes.

R: What was it like being a student here? Were there a lot of Hispanic students here?

G: No. Well, not as many as now, my gosh! There were no federal programs at the time. There were no grant programs. There

were no civil rights. There was nothing, nothing like that. I think in the class of '57 when I graduated, the first black woman graduated with me from UTEP. And there was one basketball player, Charlie Brown, I remember, because we used to go eat tacos at my mother's house all the time, he was the first one that opened the doors for athletics here, just like maybe Jackie Robinson did for Baseball. But there were not too many, maybe there were about three or four in each class. And the classes that I was taking, the veterans were the ones that were really coming over as engineering students. And I think the G.I. Bill was the greatest thing that helped our people, and I saw more men than women. The sororities were very, very bigoted here. The Tri Deltas, the Chi Os, all of these. And then one of my friends, Barbara Broughton from El Paso High, started Phrateres, and that was kind of a social deal. I wasn't a joiner for that, I just wanted to get my degree and get out. (Chuckles) And that was the most important thing.

R: What was it like going to school and being pregnant and doing your student teaching? How did people react to you as a pregnant Chicana going to school?

G: No, they just took it for granted here. It was not that bad. I was accepted and it was nice. The gentlemen, you know, would be gentlemen. They're not slamming the door on you because you're the women's lib thing. But I think at the time it was very hard, okay, it wasn't easy, and I [don't] think I could ever do it again because God gives you your youth only one time, and your strength and your vitality. And when I tell my daughter and family and friends,

and now the classes that I'm teaching for the Community College in the Barrio in South El Paso, they can't believe that I went to school pregnant, to this day, 1985. Yes I did. Why not? I wanted my degree. There's no reason. A pregnancy is a normal thing. I mean I even played basketball, I refereed, and I taught dancing. There's no reason for that. I was darn strong, I thought, you know. And they ask me, "Morning sickness?" I said, "What's that?" I didn't have time for that. And if I thought I was going to have it, I would have a cracker and just go about, you know, or an orange or something. But I wanted to be so strong and so determined and the pregnancy was nothing, you know, as such.

The practice teaching was difficult because I was nursing my child, and practice teaching modern dance and physical education, sports and tap dancing. And then my breasts would build up and overflow, and I would have to go back in to feed my child, and it was kind of hard. That was hard, that was hard because I feel that my son, as a result, is very nervous because I was giving him nervous milk; chocolate and vanilla, but it was nervous milk. You know, really, you have to be in a tranquil, peaceful environment. You don't realize that until many years after that. You know how they tell you to relax. How many mothers can relax? How many? I just...I admire mothers, I really do.

R: Where did you practice teach, at El Paso High?

G: Austin High School.

R: Austin High School.

G: Yeah. That was one of the first...there were only two Mexican Americans at the time. It was a beautiful gal by the name of

Yvonne Lozano, who graduated valedictorian from Austin High School in '52 or '53, and she was back in the Chemistry Department, she was a scholar. You know, people label people that play sports and dance as dummies, and they just say, "Well, here comes that idiot dancing down the hall," or something. You know, people stereotype you. You know, you kind of have feelings like that. The world does. You know, that tremendous triangle that Plato and Aristotle and Socrates have developed on the ages of intellect, on the ages of using your mind and you're the gold person, and using your body and mind and you're silver level, and using just your manual work and that's your bronze. And to this day people are still categorizing that.

So I never felt I was an intelligent person because of the field that I took. Maybe if I took math or physics or chemistry, even music. Music is a tremendously beautiful field, it's very hard. I have a minor in music, but I mean I didn't go that route; or foreign languages, which I could have gone to, 'cause my teachers were always saying, "You already know Spanish, you already know English, you can go into that and go into the two languages with literature. Very easy." I felt that I had the dancing background, I said, "Why not go that route?" I thought it was easy. I thought it was wonderful. I enjoyed it. To this day, I'm still enjoying it.

The question that you had asked me, regurgitate it, what did you say?

R: About how did you handle going to school and having a child. Sort of a related question, how did your husband help you?

G: Oh, he was beautiful. He was beautiful. Now, one time when I was in Chihuahua they laughed at me. They couldn't imagine me going to school and married, number one. And then when they found out I was pregnant and going to school, they just floored. They said, "Why?! A woman that is married should stay home, and especially the pregnant [woman]. Poor child," and all that. My husband was working for American Airlines and he would work night shifts, and he'd get out and he would take turns taking care of the baby, you know, and then come to school two or three hours. But never sleeping, I don't think he slept. I don't know how he did it but he didn't sleep. Because he would take care of the baby during the day; take me, because I didn't drive, take me to practice teach and take me to classes, whatever, or I would walk to classes. We would coordinate and synchronize it so that our schedules would help each other. But he was the one that suffered, because if it weren't for him I wouldn't have finished school. If it weren't for his generous consideration of me, we wouldn't have done it. And we often sit down and talk, and people are amazed. They said, "How could you do it?" And we did it.

R: What did he work at American Airlines?

G: He was...it's called fleet service. That's loading the planes with the baggage. And he thought it was a real nice job because he could change his hours from going to school and all that. He dropped out one year so that I could continue. He says, "I'm not going to get pregnant. You will." (Laughs)

So, yeah, I think it's very important. And he is from Mexico and a tremendously considerate, tremendously good Christian. And I think some of our men need to develop that concept, especially our macho, macho men. I don't care who says that the men are not macho, I don't care, in any culture, they are. They are, they have this dominant, superior attitude that women are not worth a darn. And that's what I try to project--women are beautiful, women are great. And I think we're very important, very important.

R: So you graduated before he did, then?

G: Yeah, I graduated in '57, he graduated in '58, yes. He says I was more important. I thought that was beautiful.

R: And then you both went and were teachers?

G: Yes. And he's still teaching, he's still teaching. And I quit teaching, but I'm still teaching down in the barrio, not in a contractual way, it's more of a free-spiritual way that I'm enjoying tremendously. I can write my things, I can do this, I can go to meetings. You know, I can work my ways a little bit more flexible and nobody can tell me, "You can't do it."

R: You taught here for a while, didn't you, in the Dance Department?

G: Here?

R: At UTEP.

G: Just one semester, just a summer class. Then I had to go through heck to do that, and I could never do it. When I was going to start my continuing education last year, I developed that leg that is degenerating on me. It's too late now. I was ready to write to Pat Mora, "Thank you, Pat."

She was so beautiful trying to see to open the doors in Continuing Education. But it's too late. See, sometimes it's too late. My biggest dream was to teach at this university someday and train my teachers so they can go out and learn every little thing that I could. A little bit of what I knew in the dance, in the culture, in the bilingual, in the concepts and attitudes and human relations-- everything that I did I was going to put in a capsule of training. But I never had the opportunity here and I'm not going to fight it anymore, you know. When you get a certain age, why fight? You just kind of turn your head and go about another way.

You know, I went through the Fine Arts Department, I went to the Physical Education Department, I went through the Education Department, Chicano Studies and all different areas, "See where I can help you. Maybe put a class where it could be eclectically wonderful so I could gear all these areas," you know. No, I'm not qualified, they said. So, it doesn't matter. Quali...baloney. Only the Lord knows what my qualifications are.

R: Could you sense a dichotomy when you were going to school here at Texas Western? Could you sense it between, say, the Anglo students and the Hispanic students in terms of, was there a lot of mixture, or did you notice any sort of separatism?

G: The mixture was more in the adult ones than it was from the high school. The guys that had, that are more mature or the people that were retired, I was amazed and really,

really astonished at the people that were getting their degrees or graduate degrees that had already gone through the Armed Forces and back over here. I thought that was beautiful to see 60, 70, 80 year olds, you know, taking classes. I think that's wonderful. I think education never should cease, and they were doing it maybe for enrichment. They didn't have Continuing Education at the time. But I had those classes, they registered for whatever reason. But the younger kids didn't get as much. As far as there was the harmony and unity that you see at UCLA or Stanford or whatever, there was more of a cultural pluralism that I saw, you know, in the different universities when I was on tour or when I lectured. But this university didn't have that getting, even though I felt that... The city itself is divided. I don't care if you tell me, "No, it's not." It is divided. These people that I work with in the barrio, never in their lives would they ever come into Kern Place or Coronado or the Country Club. Never. Unless they get out of that and educate themselves, would like to. I mean, not that anything is there at Coronado or anything. You know, and they have their own life there. And some people that are, unfortunately they are Mexican American or assimilated or acculturated or whatever, think this is the pits. Hey, you find your happiness and your peace wherever, whether it's poor or rich. Some of these people do not know luxury. They've never been exposed to luxury.

R: Maybe they're happier. (Laughs)

G: Exactly. But, you know, they have the opportunity to make their life a little easier. I would like for them all to have a washing machine, for all of them to have their stove, to all have one bathroom for the family, not 30 or 40 sharing like I see. And that's the reality.

People in El Paso have a tendency to forget their roots of poverty. And I was in that attitude. You know why? Because since I thought that I graduated in '57, I thought everybody had gotten out with me. If I did it with struggling, they joined me too. That wasn't the thing. Then I forgot that I had lived at the Alamito Projects in the forties, and I thought they were Hollywood because they had tile and running water and hot water. God! The first time I had seen hot water. But the thing about it is, I moved out and I... you surely forget very soon. Once you're comfortable you don't want to be reminded. Some of these people don't want to be reminded.

I think that if we're going to label people like Archie Bunker...I have been called every label under the book--you know, really. They have called me Chicana-honky, they have called me Tía Taco, they have called me Coconut, they have called me radical, they have called me militant, they have called me anti-American. They have called me...you know, from both the conservative to the liberal. I have had it. And I went through a period of horrible, horrible depression and suffering, and I even was saying, "Hey, I don't think

there's a God. He's not listening to me," you know. And there was a God. But I was just too impatient with him, you know, I was not really devout in my faith. He was just testing me. He said, "Hey, gal, you can do it." But you know, you don't until somebody tells you. Father Jaime Madrid was the one that says, "What are you trying to do, Rosa?" And I said, "All I'm trying to do is teach love and teach human relations and teach unity and teach culture and teach ethnicity, and through the medium of music and dance." He says, "And why are you so upset?" "'Cause nobody is listening and everybody is calling me all these names." He says, "Maybe you're trying too hard. Look at the world the way it is." And this is about 13 years ago when he told me that. "Look at the way the world is. Even God." So I said, "Gee, that's right. Who am I? A big cheese, you know, nothing." We're just a little cell in this universe compared to the whole spectrum.

But these ladies in the barrio are very unique, very unique. I have learned a lot from them. I have four that don't know how to read or write, they're illiterates, and they come and apologize to me, "Sra. Guerrero, no sé escribir, I don't know how to write." /I say/ "Qué le hace, señora. But look at the children." One has had 23 children. I call her my rabbit, mi coneja, you know. (Chuckles) And then she's trying to learn. She just lost her husband last year and she's trying to, you know, to get herself. This is the first time in her life that there's the classes down there that are gearing to

human relations, to English, to citizenship, to even folklórico. I have my viejitas dancing folklórico down there. And so you make them feel good. Never in my life has somebody come and said, "Hey, sí se puede." You know, you have the Herald-Post doing this symposium, Sí Se Puede. I've always said that, sí se puede. You can do it. All you need is just a little push, a little motivation. That's all. Get that little turtle started so she can be a rabbit, you know. I'm /not/ talking about the reproductive rabbit, but the fast rabbit in life.

But I've learned a lot from these people. I tell them, "It doesn't matter if you don't know how to read or write. It's not a sin. But here is the opportunity, that we're teaching. Now, take the bull by the horn and do it." So I'd see, "Ay, Sra. Guerrero, Ud. habla tan bonito." I said, "No, you are inspiring me. I don't talk pretty." They feel that I'm such a scholar. "I'm nothing," I said. "I don't care how many degrees I might have or how much school. I am down here trying to help you." And that's the thing. I don't want to forget my poverty. I don't want to forget where I came from. I don't want to forget my ethnicity. I don't want to forget that there is a renaissance in all of us, whoever we are. Like Phil Ortega has always said, a reborn Chicano or renaissance of your spirit or whatever.

They call me in the University of Houston, one of the guys that was doing an evaluation on the little book that I'm going to show you, he called me a romanticist, you know, one of these Chicana romanticists, which is true. In a way,

yes I am, because I want to see people happy. And there could be...there's nothing in the world that can tell you that you are happy in a very, very exclusive home or whatever, you know. And I think the whole component of the thing is that many times in the El Movimiento that came in, one of the things that was so deep for me when the Chicanas were asking me questions, I couldn't understand the word Chicano or Chicanismo until I went into more deep roots about why are they like this? I had such strong for Mexicanismo that Chicano to me was a pseudoword. You know, how are they trying to hide it? When the LULAC started, League of United Latin American Citizens, in about 1927, '28, in Texas, I said, "Why didn't they call themselves LUMAC?" 'Cause the word Mexicano was still dirty. And I said, "Why aren't people proud of that?" See, that's why one of the things. And I said, "I was so strong with my roots and my culture and my identity, my language, "¿Estos qué andan haciendo allí nomás?" You know, I couldn't understand them. And then finally I said, "But they do need help."

R: Did you work with the Chicano students here during the...

G: The MECha and the MAPA and all that?

R: Yes.

G: I worked with them later on, but a lot of them didn't trust me. I couldn't blame them because they called me a vendida 'cause I was teaching at Austin High School. That was predominantly a white school, WASP school. And I did it because I was honored to teach there. My gosh! I was honored. I encountered a few

little prejudice there with some of the students, you know, but overall in the 13 years that I was there it was utopia, a utopia with a couple of sprained ankles and whatever. But it was really great.

Let me see, this guy was quoting that we talk about our cultural heritage as a beautiful one. See, I had that so deep. And he was quoting this guy, this folklorist, Hinder, that we all come back from a different type of soil or roots, and El Paso has definite roots. And I think we have, too, authenticity en la música, en la danza, en el idioma. We have authenticity that we're so proud of.

I used to say, "What can San Antonio have that we don't have?" Boy, I mean they have Henry Cisneros and they have Archbishop Flores, they have beautiful people. But before I went to San Antonio, you stereotype, until Archbishop Flores took me over there and he says, "I want you to come and awaken my people, my seminarians, my lay theologians. I want you to show them what you have, what El Paso has." I was so proud to represent El Paso, and since then I've been there about 25 times and I loved it, to lecture. From one little lecture at Mexican American Cultural Center, opened doors for me to Edgewood School District, San Antonio School District. Man alive, people were just asking. I couldn't keep up [with] the demand. They're still calling me. Mrs. Mary Bernal, the wife of Joe Bernal, who is [a] representative, "Andale, Rosita." I said, "I can't dance anymore." "Come and lecture. Give us some of your enthusiasm, your vitamins, your..." And I said, "I can't do it."

And I feel so bad inside that I can't dance with them. I can show, but it kills me not to jump around, you know, like I always have. A hyper energy since the age of two or three years old, and all of a sudden you cut that down. I even gained about 40 pounds, from not doing activity. It's 'cause I can't. Any movement like that, that will sever the nerve, you know. And it kills me. My son says, "It's the way we're eating in this house. Too many fried things and blah, blah, blah, blah." I says, "I limit my intake of nutrition. I'm a nutritionist, too, majoring in health, physical education, recreation. I'm just not burning it. You know what I mean? The intake is still the same." "Well, then don't take so much intake, Mama, because you can't burn it."

So all in all, I'm just saying that I am very proud of this university now. And I told Dr. Monroe, I wrote him after I was elected to that thing, and I told him, I said, "I am so glad they have you, sir. I am so glad that they have a man of vision with a historical background," because his major is history and all that. "And I am so glad you have been so responsive to Chicano Week." We never used to have it. They used to fight it at this university to have it. You know, they used to fight it. And I remember when they fought for Chicano Studies. I was right in with the group, you know, because I was working on my graduate classes. But all in all, it's all right. You know, I think the university's growing and growing and growing.

R: What do you think the significance of the University is now to the El Paso community?

- G: Oh, I think it's wonderful. I think it's great. I think you could be doing more with the community. You know what I mean? Like the Community College is. They're passing this thing that Community College should go to a four year deal. There's pros and cons on that, you know, with the taxes and whatever. But this is the first time in the life of these Chicanos, whether they call UTEP or Community College, Harvard on the Border or the Little Chicano University or whatever, it doesn't matter. The thing about it is this--any educational institution is important, very important. And when you have kids that never in their life have had the opportunity to go in with a low, low tuition, you're opening the doors for somebody to get educated better. And I think we need more. You know, this city is getting bigger and bigger and bigger.
- R: Do you think UTEP has become much more responsive to the Chicano community in El Paso?
- G: Yes. I think in the last three, four years, I have seen that. Just the last three, four years it has. But it still needs a lot to... you know, a lot needs to be done more with maybe some of the industrial development here, maybe the economics, maybe the marketing. Maybe this different twin plants that are coming, maybe gearing a bilingual concept of marketing and bilingual concept of commerce and all that. We don't think of that, we don't think of that. And yet when you see these four or five Russians commentating with four or five americanos, every Russian usually knows how to speak English and Russian, and the americanos all need an interpreter, or maybe one there. And that's sad because the linguistics is still very behind in the whole United States.

- R: Yeah. There's a superiority that, you know, if you don't speak English, that's just too bad.
- G: But if you speak many languages...look at Kissinger. It's great.
- R: Well, thank you for sharing all about...
- G: Oh, you're welcome.
- R: Your memories of the University and the sort of a role model, because I'm sure there are not many women who were having children and going to school in the 1950s.
- G: No.
- R: And that certainly is an accomplishment.
- G: Yeah. You know, today at 11:30 I have a short little meeting. One of my friends, Martha Hernandez, went to Girls' State with me, Martha Hernandez represented Bowie, I represented El Paso High, and Isela Romero represented Jefferson, and Sue Williams from Austin. And the four of us went to Girls' State. Well, the three Chicanas are still married, Sue got divorced right away. I don't know what the reason was, and I don't know where Sue is. But Isela is a teacher, one of the best teachers down in South El Paso. Martha Hernandez is running, she just got that head job with the County Clerk that they assigned her. And she asked me to go help her and whatever. I said, "I'll do whatever." Because I think the city needs to know where we started, how we went to Girls' State and what we are doing now. We were already leaders in our way and everybody representing their own thing. I think, you know, looking back at Girls' State, I think Girls' State opened so many visions for us. Because that's the first time

the three of us--I don't know about Sue--but three of us had never left home, left mamá and papá and the family, and had a whole week of knowing parliamentary procedures and met with Governor Shivers, at that time it was Alan Shivers, and met with L.B.J., who was just a senator. And all these things, I thought it was amazing. And that's the first time we stayed together in like a camp and the dormitories and whatever. But it was great. And I think we need to do that more with our little Chicanos that are so isolated from knowing another environment--not only teaching them civics and parliamentary procedures but teaching them life, teaching them business, teaching them marketing, teaching them industry. You know, you have your private industry councils here, that they should have a program... I don't know, I'm just saying that, that this is what they need, they need to get out of that and be exposed to other people. That, that to me is really a true education.

R: Well, thank you very much.