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Interview no. 801

Albert Lucero

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE:	<u>Albert Lucero</u>
INTERVIEWER:	<u>Charles Ambler</u>
PROJECT:	<u>World War II</u>
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	<u>November 23, 1993</u>
TERMS OF USE:	<u>Unrestricted</u>
TAPE NO:	<u>801</u>
TRANSCRIPT NO:	<u>801</u>
TRANSCRIBER:	<u>Charles Ambler</u>

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in Anthony, New Mexico, 1933; grew up on a cotton farm during World War II.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recounts life on the farm and the experience of the World War II homefront; shares perceptions of the meaning of the war; feelings in the family regarding older siblings who were in the service; experience of rationing, attitudes toward a German family in the area; Discusses the POW camp established in Anthony, Texas to provide labor for cotton farms.

Length of Interview: 45 minutes Length of Transcript 20 pages

Interview with Albert Lucero of Anthony, Texas at U.T.E.P.,
November 23, 1993. Interviewer: Charles Ambler, History
Department, UTEP.

Summary: This interview covers the recollections of a boyhood during World War II in Anthony, New Mexico. The boy was born in 1933 and came from a Spanish-speaking family and grew up on a cotton farm. The interview recounts life on the farm and the experience of the World War II homefront. Among the topics covered are perceptions of the meaning of the war, the feelings in the family regarding older siblings who were in the service, the experience of rationing, attitudes toward a German family in the area, and especially the POW camp established in Anthony to provide labor for cotton farms.

Interview with Albert Lucero of Anthony, Texas at U.T.E.P.,
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Department, UTEP.

A: Maybe you could begin by just telling a little bit about your early childhood, where you lived, where you grew up, so that what you talk about makes more sense to us later on.

L: Well, I was born in 1933, so by the time of the War I was about 10 or 11 years old. Of course, I was born in Anthony, New Mexico, on the New Mexico side, on a very small farm. I'm one of six children. There's three boys and three girls, mom and dad of course. I've lived all my life in Anthony, New Mexico and I was born and raised on a farm. And as I said, in 1943, 1944 period I was ten or eleven years.

A: Had your family lived in Anthony for a long time?

L: Yes, the three older children. My dad was born in Las Cruces and my mom in Doña Ana, a little community north of Las Cruces and my older three in the family were born in Las Cruces and they moved to Anthony on the farm in...well I don't know the year, but the remaining three of us were born in Anthony, in the Anthony area, at home in fact. That's briefly where my parents came from. They were born there and their parents were born there prior to them. So, that's basically...we lived continuously on the farm there in Anthony throughout my whole childhood and adult life.

A: What kind of farm was that?

L: Well, basically a cotton farm. In those days cotton was the prime crop. We didn't have the large pecan tree groves that we

see nowadays and the other, other things that we see nowadays, but that was the staple crop, the mainstay of the Mesilla Valley area.

A: For my curiosity, growing up in your family did you speak Spanish or English?

L: Yes, Spanish was my first language. In those days we didn't learn English until we entered to school. At that time we entered what we called them pre-first I guess. For those non-English-speaking kids. That was the primary purpose of that grade level that was called pre-first. And of course those who were English-speaking kids entered the first grade. So, consequently, I entered pre-first. So, that's how that happened. That was certainly the days before bilingual. That didn't exist in those days. ah. I entered school when I was five because birthday is February so I was not six before that magic date of September or whatever it usually is, so I was first year of school that year, which was at Anthony of course. We were all bussed into the town of Anthony if you will from the surrounding farming areas, because that's where the school was of course.

A: Now, those years in which you were growing up were the Depression. did you have any sense of that being a period of hard times as you were growing up?

L: Of course, I was born in '33 which was right in the midst of the midst of the Depression years but in my early years I heard no discussion really of any impact on us in that area so as I see it now we weren't impacted by the Depression period

and all the negatives that maybe the urban areas were. We were on a farm situation. WE were certainly poor, but I don't remember any discussion or experience myself of any period that I didn't have three meals a day. There was really no adverse impact on us. Although we were probably like I said at the bottom of the scale, there, during those years, but we had shelter, we had food, we had you know all the basic necessities.

A: On the farm did you try to grow things for your own use? vegetables and keep cows or anything like that?

L: Oh yes, it was common practice that almost everyone around that area had a small vegetable garden if you will, because it's all irrigated so we were able to do that. ah ah. Where we planted a small garden in addition to the basic crop of cotton of course. And we had chickens, and we had cows, and we had milk. We always had a milk cow. In fact that was my responsibility. Milk the cow twice a day and feed them. And we had horses, then for work out in the field and that was my task to keep water available for those animals. I can still see myself pumping that water. If you don't think...that was a chore, to have enough for those thirsty horses when they come out of the from working all day or half a day, whenever they came in. The cow was my responsibility, the feeding and milking. That brings back real fond memories of that. Probably I fussed like any other kid, but ah that was the routine for...we all had chores.

A: How did you fit in to the family? Did you have older brothers

and sisters?

L: Yes, well I'm the second youngest, I guess, like I said of six. I'm the youngest male and I have a younger sister. And all the rest were older so I was kind of the guy that just kind of tagged along with rest. But I did have my basic chores. I guess responsibility used to come early in those days.

A: On a farm.

L: Everybody had things to do and we kind of did them and without any grumbling I guess that I remember. If mom and dad were here they'd probably have a different version of that (laughs).

A: The surrounding farms there, were some of these neighbors also your relatives or close friends? or not?

L: No...friends of course, because everybody kind of knew people around them on the nearby farms, but because of the fact that my parents had come from [Las] Cruces we didn't have any immediate relatives. All of my cousins and aunts and uncles were in Cruces there were many on my wife and my mother's side had gone to California. So in the immediate area we did not have any immediate relatives. So, consequently, I didn't know and I still don't know many of my cousins, my first cousins and second cousins and so forth.

A: Why had they gone to California?

L: Well, typically, in those periods people were just going elsewhere to find better jobs, better situations. I guess it was in a different day than it is now. There were some that

would go elsewhere for that purpose.

A: Did your parents own this farm, or rent it?

L: Well, they owned the home property itself, but the small farm that my dad farmed was and still is school property, so it wasn't ours. I guess it was leased to his sister, my aunt, and my dad--and she lived in Cruces--so he farmed it all his life for her. It was under lease as I remember kind of thinking back, because recently they were going to build a school because it's still school property

A: Were most of the other farmers that lived around in the same that you did also Mexican American? or were they mixed up.

L: Oh, I don't know I'd say...I wouldn't remember the percentages, but probably more than half were Mexican American. But we were all mixed.

A: Let's turn to the explicit subject of the interview which is the World War II experience.

L: And if you have any other questions, I don't know what really to add, other than just chatter, so feel free to...

A: Right, that's fine. Can you remember the attack on Pearl Harbor, like now we're talking about the Kennedy assassination? For an earlier generation that's much the same kind of thing.

L: I thought you were going to ask me do you "Remember Pearl Harbor" that's the old saying. Yes, I do. In 1941, on December 7th of course I was...what

A: Eight years old?

L: Eight years old, or less. I do remember it was a Sunday. But

we always had a radio. That was prior to TV of course, we always had a radio. So I remember, vaguely. This is kind of very vaguely, but I remember very clearly it was a Sunday, and it seemed that it was around noonish in our area, but all of a sudden I remember something serious of course was happening but I didn't understand the complexity and totalness of it, because I guess remember my folks and my older brothers speaking about it, and I remember a lot of concern and follow-up news broadcasts I don't remember specifics but I remember but everybody seemed to be listening to the radio and wanting to hear follow-ups. But I do remember that very clearly. I didn't know what's war, what's Japan, you know that kind of...I don't have the specific thoughts on that, but I do remember that something very serious was happening.

A: And as the weeks went on after that, and months for that matter--although you were still obviously very young--do you remember at all about how you came to think about what the war was and what it meant? In school, for example, did teachers talk about it?

L: Yes. Of course, that was a constant thing, a daily thing. It was very, very obvious, talked about. We were impacted at school in my different ways. We had the bond drives. All the efforts, initiatives through the school systems. I remember we used to buy the little savings stamps similar to postal stamps and we'd to put them in books until we accumulated enough. I think they were worth like 25 cents perhaps. And we'd buy those and I remember my folks would give me a quarter

or whatever it was to buy those stamps on a recurring kind of basis. And we would keep those books until we had enough to trade them in for the cost of a savings bond, which was \$18.75 for the twenty-five dollar denomination. We used to do those kind of things and of course I would always listen to the radio most of the time we had a daily paper so I would kind of scan those things and I remember the headlines and we would kind of keep up to date with the events as they progressed in both theaters, the European and the Asian theater. The other thing of course we had a movie theater in Anthony that once in a while we were lucky enough to get that quarter or whatever it took to go and typically it was on a Saturday--a Saturday matinee kind of thing that you hear so often but I experienced that--and we were all kids. And I was always probably one of the smaller in my classes, so we'd joke about because the cut off age for kids was maybe twelve or whatever and I was twelve for about three years. If you know what I mean...I could get in for the price of a.... But anyway what I'm leading to is at the Saturday movies they usually had the newsreel on war events, I forget, Paramount I think. I forget what they were called, "Paramount News" I think is what it was. They'd show a five minute or whatever clip on events of the war. And that kind of kept, everybody was into it on a constant basis, even us as kids so I can only share my experience. And as the thing progressed of course we would keep attuned to what was happening with all the guys that had gone off to war, including my older brothers. My oldest saw combat in the

Philippines after the invasion of the Philippines. He was the only one who saw combat...during that war. My other brother saw combat, but that was in the Navy during Korea. He also, my next older brother, between my eldest and myself, he was in the service during World War II, but in a non-combat period, so we kind of kept tack of that. I experienced from the adults discussions of I forget the number that were killed in action during that period. I think it was at least two from the second war from the Anthony area that were killed. So, we were exposed to that from our age.

A: Do you remember anything about that specifically. This is one of things that I think we need to bring home to people today.

L: Well, ah, I remember I wondered how it was, I wondered what happened, I wonder were they really killed, were they brought back, and I guess this was a take off from what I would hear from adults. Was it an empty coffin? I don't know, I kind of remember wondering about that.

A: But these would have been men not from a family you knew well. Just people from the town?

L: These were people that my parents knew, not that I knew, because these would be much older guys than myself of course but I didn't know any of them personally but my parents certainly did and my older brothers did. Yes I kind of related, I guess it made us kind of wonder could it happen to one of ours, and I experienced the emotions of my mom of course, my dad you know he showed no emotions. My mother and I were very close and I experience all of the emotions with

her probably most of them that she experience. The anguish the sadness, the heartache, all of those negative emotions of having one of her sons off somewhere in danger.

A: Could you be any more specific about that, or tell us a little about her feelings and what she talked about.

L: It wasn't so much talking. As a young kid I was into everything I guess, and I would find her crying. a bunch of times and So that was mainly the thing. I don't remember specific conversations. I was old enough to know what it was all about or why. I don't remember asking or for her to tell me her feelings, but I remember sensing that situation with her, and I suppose she didn't offer too much commentary I guess for her consideration for me.

A: Do you remember when your brother left for the war?

L: Not really. When he left, he left for Fort Bliss. In those days--Fort Bliss, El Paso--we went to El Paso, I did as a kid tagging along with my folks, maybe once every six months, or so, that kind of thing. El Paso, Fort Bliss was way far. So that was We were able to see him, we visited him at Fort Bliss during his basic, before being shipped elsewhere. I remember military all over the place. My other brother just went and I never saw him until he came back on leave. But that was my experience with my older brother.

A: What kind of contact did you have with your brother when he was overseas?

L: Letters only.

A: The V-mail kind of things.

- L: Yeah. During those days letters were censored, and I think I remember some being blocked out or penned out or whatever, but. I never wrote to him personally, but we always read letters that he wrote home, to mom of course. Mom was the addressee, but they were written to all of us. I remember them taking quite awhile.
- A: Do you remember anything in particular that he would write about that intrigued you as a child?
- L: No, I can't say that I do, not specifically that he wrote about. Of course watching for the mailman--we had rural delivery--that was a daily thing. Everybody watched for the mailman. Waited for that letter or whatever.
- A: In recollecting when your brother came home, do you have any sense of how the war changed his life and made life different for people like him who experienced it?
- L: No, I guess not. Now as an adult I can see, but at the time I can't say that I did to answer your question specifically. All we experience when he came back we were all thrilled and joyful and happy that he was back. We were all proud. You know, all the positive things when he came back. Specially my older brother because of the added danger of having been in an actual combat situation. When we were kids, you know, I couldn't envision what that was. What could it be other than people shooting people and people getting killed and wounded, etc. etc. But I don't know, at the time I can't say that I said he was this way and now he's this way. I can't say that I remember that.

A: In the course of the war do you remember any larger events that took place beyond El Paso having to do with the war, whatever, that particularly impressed in your memory.

L: There were all kinds of events. I remember one local initiative in the surrounding area, La Union I think it was, I don't know if you know it, but it's in the area. AN effort to raise--I forget the plant--the plant that they extract to obtain the rubber. Of course rubber was a very scarce commodity then for the war effort as well as for the local use. That and of course I experienced all the rationing things from shoes, to food, to gasoline, to everything, meats, sugar, all the food commodities--most of them were rationed. We were issued the stamps according to the family size and whatever the criteria were. I remember all of that very clearly. We always had a jalopy. And of course we had a gas ration and a ration for tires. That was a very strict ration. But we always seemed to have ample to do what we needed to do. Um. I know that farmers had an extra ration of gasoline for tractors, those who had tractors. At the time we didn't have a tractor. But for those who did. I think we were allowed an extra amount for our vehicle, because of the farm situation, I suppose. Off hand that's what I remember.

A: Anything special about the rationing, or anything like that you recall? Anything that sticks in your mind.

L: Not really, just a curious thing. I know that sugar was rationed quite heavily. AT the time we didn't travel into Juarez. Sugar there was available, but on this side it

wasn't. It was a slightly different sugar--it wasn't as refined I guess. I don't know how we got it, because we never went to Juarez, but maybe somebody else, I don't know. But I remember initially that started, I guess we had more than we were allowed to have on hand, so I remember hiding the excess. I don't remember where we hid it, as if somebody was going to come and check your bins and take the extra over and above whatever the allowance was. I kind of remember that now. I hadn't thought of that in years. Shoes of course. We kind of used to wait our turn to buy shoes. Stamps were kind of limited in some of those areas. Other than that I don't remember anything specific.

A: What about in school, beyond the drives for bonds and so forth, do you remember any special emphasis on the war? Did teachers teach current events? or try to tell about what was happening in the war, or did they try to ignore it?

L: No, I think everybody was very interested. I think everybody was being very upfront with the information as much as was available in those days. No, specifically no. I think everybody was interested. All us kids, and all the adults and the teachers.

A: One of the things we are looking at is the different ways that people who are Mexican American may have looked at the war compared to those who are Anglo American? Did you ever sense any distinction in that way?

L: I grew up with the idea that it was one effort and in those days we didn't have quite obvious and quite visible situation

of ethnic differences and whatever. It was one effort and everybody was contributing toward that effort, regardless of sex, or race, or background, or ethnic, or whatever.

A: What about the larger events? Do you remember things like D-Day or something like that that really sticks in your mind.

L: Oh yeah. I remember all those days. I remember all the major battles in the Pacific. I remember major battles in North Africa, Italy. I kept up with the progress of the war in both theaters. All the island hopping in the Pacific and of course as I said and all the events in Europe leading up to D-Day. Yes I remember D-Day quite well.

A: Would you say you were ordinary in that respect and all your friends were doing the same thing? Or were you more current events oriented?

L: I don't really know. I was interested in the events. I can't say any more or less than the other kids my age I guess.

A: This is hard, because we've learned a lot since. To you, did you have any idea of what the war was all about? Except that it was us against them?

L: Ah, not really other than the fact that there was some real bad, or negative effort by the Germans and the Japanese that we didn't want. I don't want to bias it with what I've since learned and picked up since. That's how I looked at it. Because I didn't--of course I had no background, no education no experience of anything to really answer your question directly--but that's kind of the sense that I had--that here we had these evil forces if you will I suppose. They were

trying and eventually might impact on us, the United States.
And we of course needed to counter that threat.

A: Did you ever have fears that the war was going to come home?
That there might be planes coming over head.

L: No, no, no. Although we'd hear comments once in a while about
efforts perhaps being made through Mexico and potential
landings on the west coast and those also on the east coast.
But those were kind of far-fetched and I don't remember that
I felt that they were real threats. But they were there.

A: What about our American leaders? People like Roosevelt, did
you have any sense of who he was?

L: Oh yes, yes, sure. My dad was always interested in politics
and that kind of thing, but yes I knew who Roosevelt was and
Eleanor.

A: What was the dog's name?....Fala.

L: Fala.

Tape side 2

L: Yes, as I was saying. I remember Hitler, and Mussolini before
he was zapped.

A: Were your parents big Roosevelt supporters, did they regard
him as a hero?

L: No, in fact my dad was always a Republican. So, no I got it
from that perspective. No he was not a big hero. I remember
him then as the president of course.

A: Do you remember hearing him on the radio?

L: Yes, yes, yes, I remember him.

A: Was that a kind of comforting presence to kids or you didn't

pay much attention?

L: We didn't pay much attention. He was way, away somewhere. No, it didn't have much direct impact on me then.

A: What about the prisoners of war that you have mentioned.

L: Okay. The prisoners of war were German and Italian. I can't remember specifically but this was probably it seems that they were in the area for two cotton picking season. Cotton picking season--I don't know if you know this--is from September through December of each year. So it was two years that would have been that period in '43 and '44, because the war ended in '45 as you know. So it seems like they were in the Anthony area, that I remember, for two years more or less. But anyway there was a they were brought to the Anthony area with the intent to help farmers with their labor requirements because all of the young males were gone of course and some of the people that came from Mexico illegally then those were very few, almost nonexistent in those times. People didn't want to come here to be drafted possibly or whatever I don't remember maybe the borders were more controlled then or conditions were different. I don't remember much illegal Mexican labor available. They [the prisoners of war] were brought in with the idea to help farmers do their cotton picking. And for that purpose the Army built a small compound, a little tent city--I still recall--right behind our elementary school in Anthony--in the City of Anthony if you will. But the area behind our school was all boonies still so I remember. The tents were set up right behind our school,

within view of our school. And I don't know how many military there were. There must have been 30 or 50 military for security purposes and I don't know how many prisoners. And I believe they were mixed at the time, maybe not during all the period. I remember seeing them coming over right behind our house on the farm and I remember both groups, German and Italian prisoners. And I don't know how many prisoners they must have had, I'd guess between 30 and 50 maybe. Because I remember them on farm right in back of our house, the adjoining farm that belonged to somebody else, they used them there as well as other farms in the area. I remember they typically had two guards with the carbines, the rifle, and they had perhaps a group of 15 to 20 prisoners picking cotton. Apparently, as much as I can remember they used to make their own food or put it together. Thinking back, at first there was--I wouldn't say a fear of them--but a hesitancy I guess: do you want to get near these people or talk to them or anything? But after a while, kids you know we'd be amongst them. Apparently we were no threat to them from a military guards' standpoint and of course they felt that they weren't any threat to us kids and so we used to mingle with them. And I remember even then being able to pick up some of the words that the Italians would speak, because some of the words are similar to Spanish words, so we could pick some up whereas with the Germans we could not. But in any event we could communicate some way, in a minor way. I could still almost taste the bread. I don't know which ones used to give us

bread, homemade bread. And that was real good. No problem with that, any danger or anything.

A: Do you remember when the camp first was set up. Did this come as a surprise to people or were you prepared for it. It's odd that it's right next to the school in a way.

L: Well, no. I don't know. It just happened I guess. In those days they didn't do any environmental impact studies or anything. It's things they just did. The Army decided they were going to do it and they did it right there. And that was it. There was no problem. Like I said, the whole area behind the school was all vacant and all undeveloped. It was a good place for it really. It was kind of funny. We knew the purpose of it. But quite obviously those people were not cotton pickers. I guess an average... You pick cotton by the weight. You get paid by how much you pick by weight. I guess a typical amount [that the prisoners would pick] as I remember was like 75, 80 pounds. Anybody picking over 100 pounds was doing quite well and I don't think there were very many of them that picked over a 100. To give you a comparison at that age I was probably picking a 150. Gee, I remember saying, "wow, what kind of help are these guys really?" And I had no reason to carry that on other than as some kind of passing thought. Who was I at that age to say what was the effectiveness of all of this, but that was just a curious thing that I remember. Because that's how we kind of related to it. Here I was a 10 year old, 11 year old, or whatever, picking more than the.... But it was kind of funny that the

same kind of fear that I mentioned earlier about the [not intelligible] of the German people and the Japanese, etc. And early on the Italians of course. That didn't translate to the situation that we had now with the POWs in our backyard. We saw them--after that initial curiosity--we saw them, I saw them as people. I couldn't see that these were the people that we were fighting miles and miles away.

A: So you didn't hear adults, for example, expressing concern that these dangerous enemies were right next to the school, or something like that.

L: No, no. I don't know if that my own recollection, my perception of it, but I don't recall adults, or I don't recall hearing that from adults that the you kids stay way or that these were the blankety blanks that did this and did that, no these were very friendly people. Like people we had in Anthony kind of is what came across to me.

A: Now when cotton picking season was over did the tent city go away and then they came back or were they there all year?

L: No, they were there continuously, like I said I think that they were there for two seasons, it seemed that way anyway.

A: Do you remember what they did during the off season?

L: Probably, the GIs chased after the local girls and I don't know what the prisoners did. We weren't able to go into their camp of course. These were not high security situations now that I think back on it. I don't know if you've seen how they pick cotton but usually they start at a farm and gradually they go through it row by row. But sometimes the rows are

quite long so you have people scattered from one end of the row to the other and you had one guard maybe at one end and another one. It would have been a simple matter for somebody to escape if they had chosen to do so. So it wasn't a high security kind of situation. Nor was it a very hostile kind of environment.

A: So, you made no connection between these people really...

L: Not really.

A: And the ones who were fighting against your brother or whomever.

L: Not really, not really. We didn't go out and throw rocks and tomatoes or whatever. That wasn't the case. We had one German family at the next farm which is just within view from our home. That family, as I remember, came to the area originally from Germany. I remember when the war just started, thinking wow or these maybe not spies per se but are these people dangerous or are they our friends? But that kind of went away because my dad and the man were well next door neighbors and in fact he knew Spanish better than I did. Just like anyone in the area. His name was [Okinseis???] I can remember the old man and his wife. And she was a very neighborly person. Of course we always crave the goodies and the candies and etc. My mom and dad would visit them and once in a while we would tag along. I remember that, but I don't know much of the situation... but I guess she would bake and she would bring over some of those real nice looking coffee cakes. And boy we would go for that. Kind of makes me wonder

about our sensitivity nowadays to ethnic groups, in those days we didn't seem to have that so visible...how can I say it sensitivity to the various ethnic groups. We just were I guess. If somebody was our neighbor then somebody was our neighbor not because they were one ethnic group or the other, we happened to be. Similarly, I guess the POWs. These were people trying to do the best way they could I suppose under their circumstances. They were hundred of thousands of miles from home too, I guess.

A: Any other particular recollections you have about that period. What about when the end of War came? Do you have any memory of VE or VJ Day?

L: Oh yeah, sure. I can still see the newsreels at the movie houses, the newspaper headlines. Oh yeah. Everybody was happy because the guys were starting to come home. You would see them in their uniforms and so forth. In all our daily events. You couldn't help it. It was just happening. People were coming back. Oh, all kinds of goodies started happening after that. It was a very, very nice period of my life to experience that. All of sudden we were on this very hard thing--not for me personally--but it was happening and I could see it and all of a sudden it's over. Nothing but nice things happening to us.