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Freddie Lee Reese

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Interview with
Freddie Lee Reese
Conducted by
Phyllis Kent
November 30, 1993

K: Okay. To start with, could you just give me your name, date and place of birth?

R: I am Freddie Reese and my birthday is May 25, 1927.

K: And you were born in?

R: Childress, Texas.

K: When did you come to El Paso?

R: February 1, 1941.

K: What did you think of it?

R: Well, it was nice. I went to... we lived at 805 Laurel Street. My dad rented this house. It was all he could find in El Paso at the time and I went to old Lamar School that was on Montana. It has since been torn down, the old Lamar

School has. I went there from February to May and then my dad bought a house on... let's see... Federal Street. We didn't live there very long and I went to Houston Grade School when I was in the eighth grade. And then from Houston Grade School, Mother and Daddy moved to 3516 Lebanon Street and then I went to Austin High School.

K: And you graduated there?

R: I graduated in May 1945.

K: What did you think when you were told about Pearl Harbour?

R: Well, we had just come home from church and Dad turned on the radio and that's when we heard it and we sat down and discussed it. We knew we was going to get into a war. And, oh, in the next couple of days, I think, we had an assembly. I was in the eighth grade at Houston Grade School. We had an assembly and we listened to President Roosevelt declare war.

K: Was your father young enough to... for it to be a concern of him going to war?

R: Yes, there was a concern because Daddy was in his late 30s and they were drafting men up to about thirty-six years old, I think. He just missed it by a few years and if they had

raised that age limit Dad would have to go into he service.

K: Did many of the boys you went to school with go off to fight?

R: Yes, there were a lot of them that were drafted from Austin High School and then some enlisted , that I know, after they got out of high school before they were drafted. But there were a lot of boys from Austin High School that wer drafted and also enlisted.

K: I guess I'll move on to rationing. What did you think about rationing.(chuckles)

R: Well, it wasn't very much fun when you was a teenager. There was.... You could buy nothing that had sugar in it... fruits, canned fruit. You know what I mean is canned fruits. You couldn't buy that. Of course, there was no sugar... only buy a little bit of sugar with your coupons. I had a friend whose parents lived on ... let's see, what street was it? Oh, what was the next street over? Let me think... Louisville Street. Their name were Mr. and Mrs. Sayklay and they had a daughter my age. And the Sayklays ran this little corner grocery store. About once a month, they would get a case of cokes and a box of candy, some kind

of chocolate candy bar. And Lilian after...After school Lilian Sayklay and I would go into the grocery store and said, "Freddie, cokes come in." We would have a coke and maybe a candy bar and that was about once a month. She would pass them out to her friends. (laughs)

K: How did you deal with the rationing? Did you go over to Juarez to get around it Or...

R: Well, not really. Mother went over there and she would buy sugar and she would buy fish over there. I don't remember I don't think she ever bought much over there but she would go over there to but sugar. Their sugar was a little bit darker than our sugar and it wasn't ground as fine. You could sure tell it different than American sugar.

K: You mentioned las night about having your husband, after you were married, use his commissary privileges.

R: If he could get things at the commissary, he would bring stuff to Mother from the commissary that maybe she couldn't get in town. If the commissary had it, he would get it out there and there was just a lot of things that wasn't on the market. Just a lot of things that wasn't on the shelves.

K: Was the supply in the commissary any better?

R: Well, sometimes.

K: But it wasn't consistent.

R: No, it wasn't consistent. Just when he could get it. When he could get different things for Mother out at the commissary that she couldn't get in town. She couldn't buy all it in the grocery stores.

K: Did you have any dealings with Japanese merchants or anything because I remember stories about some of them being in Juarez?

R: Well, I don't remember that. I was just a teenager. I don't remember about dealing with any Japanese merchants over there. Of course, like I just said, I was a teenager so I don't remember any of that.

K: Did you get over to Juarez fairly often?

R: Oh, some of us teenage girls would get on the street car and go over there and eat lunch at the Lobby, which was a big, nice restaurant then. They did have good Mexican food. We would get on the street car and come back home. It was pretty safe to go over there because we would go over in the

daytime and come right back. It was just a block from the bridge. And we... I would go over for dinner if I had a date. My husband and I used to go over and they had good steaks at the Lobby and I don't remember, some... but that was the main restaurant over there then. Of course, Juarez has grown just like El Paso has. Do you want me to tell you about the first time I went to Juarez?

K: Yes, if you could. (laughs)

R: Well, we had been in El Paso just about two weeks and my dad took us to Juarez one Sunday afternoon. It was in 1941. We came back home and said, "My, we're thankful for what we have." Because we saw so much poverty over there and Dad said, "Well, I think that's why I took y'all over there." (laughs) We really saw poverty for the first time. My first impression of the silvery Rio Grande-- You always hear about that and read about it in social studies and in geography books. They call it the silvery Rio Grande.-- My first impression was that it looked like a... well, I don't think it had any water in it. I thought it would be wider but I was sure surprised about that.

K: Well, what other things did you do to entertain yourself when you were a teenager?

R: Well, I was in high school. I went to high school dances. I went bowling a lot. We went on picnics. I used to go to Grandview Baptist Church. We had a lot of picnics at McKelligon Canyon. Had a lot of church activities at the church; went to some dances. After I met my husband, we.... They had dances every Saturday night at the Liberty Hall and they were always fun.

K: What were they like?

R: Well, it was more or less the music of the 40s, you know, jitterbug and waltzes. That was about it then. Jitterbug was real popular and the Big Band sound-- what we call the Big Bands now.

K: Was there a certain.... How long did they last? Just until there was nobody dancing or were they over at a certain time?

R: Oh, they were over at a certain time. They had a curfew then. A lot of people didn't stay out late, probably midnight. There was a curfew. You had to be in. I had a curfew at home, too, by midnight.

K: Made it all the time, did you?

R: And if I was going with my husband, he had to be back at the

post at twelve. You had to be back on Fort Bliss at twelve o'clock. So, that way we didn't stay out too late.

K: When did you meet your husband?

R: I met him in May 1943.

K: How did you meet?

R: We met at Grandview Baptist Church at a young people's meeting. I just knew him for awhile and he came by the house and asked me to the dental clinic picnic at McKelligon Canyon. So, he had an old car and Vincent Lovett was with him. Johnny had to go downtown and pick up some ice and some paper supplies. So, we got in the car and and drove downtown and right in front of the Plaza Park the car went dead. We picked up all the paper stuff for the picnic. So he said, "Well, I'll get out and push while you steer." (laughs) So that, right downtown. It started and we took off. (laughter) I was.... (laughs)

K: Was there any difficulty in keeping cars running?

R: Well, not particularly but this was just an old car.
(laughter)

K: Did you work?

R: No. One Christmas, I worked at Sears downtown when they had a Sears downtown. Just to have something to do during the Christmas holidays when I was in high school. And one of my girlfriends talked me into it and I sold socks. I never sold so many socks that day in all my life. That was my first experience of working and, man, was I tired standing on my feet all day. That was an experience. I never will forget that. I can remember how tired I was but that was my first experience at working anyplace. After I graduated from high school, my dad didn't want me to go to work yet, but I did. I got a job at-- summer job-- the El Paso City Lines. I typed bus and accident reports all summer. That was kind of fun. I was going to go to college but I got married on September 1, 1945, just been out of high school three months.

Then I went to work at Biggs Field. I took a Civil Service test and made pretty good on that because I was a good typist. I went to work at Biggs Field in the post office and I was secretary to the Postal Officer, Lieutenant Sutton. What I did there was type, a lot of typing, but the main thing in the post office we had to keep track of was we would get special orders from different air bases in the United States of men being transferred in. You have to type up a card for them and they would be filed in the post office. There was about twelve windows and the service

people that work at the windows knew that those men were coming in. Then, maybe you would get a special order with a thousand men on it being shipped to Biggs Field. You would get them all typed up. The next day or so you would get another special order that that special order had been deleted. That was fun. So you go pull all those cards out of the post office and write deleted on it. And maybe they were not going to come or they were sent someplace else, if they got mail the people in that worked at the windows in the post office would forward their mail to them at this new address. Now that was fun. (laughter) And I've done it many, many a days. You would get all those cards typed up and they would delete that special order. (laughter) You would get to do it all over again.

K: Government service. It's a wonderful, wonderful thing.

R: Uh huh. You had to be very, very careful to read those special orders because maybe you would find just one man was being transferred to Biggs Field and you had to type him out a card. I was the only person doing all that. So, finally, before too long they hired another boy to help me. There was so much typing. And there was twelve, like I said, twelve windows in the post office. Some of them were servicemen and some were WACs that worked there. Men come in for their mail.

K: I'm sure I won't phrase this question correctly but was there any care taken in packages coming in...

R: Oh yeah, they come in the post office.

K: Was there any particular way you were supposed to handle them if they were international?

R: No. They would just be addressed there to Biggs, you know, ever who was coming then they would come to the window and get them. I think when the packages came in they do it just as they do now. Make out a slip and put it there by their other mail and tell them they had a package.

K: You mentioned that you had worked with a POW who took care of the...

R: Yes, there was one POW that worked there and he was from Germany. He was eighteen years old. He was a tall, blonde-headed boy and he was in the German army. He said.. We weren't allowed to talk to him too much but all I do remember he told me he didn't want to be killed. He didn't want to fight. He didn't want to kill anyone. And he just raised up his hands and surrendered.

K: And wound up in El Paso, Texas. (laughs)

R: And wound up in El Paso, Texas.

K: Why didn't they want you talking to him?

R: Well, the boy spoke pretty good English. Well, I guess they just.... We didn't have a lot of time and he was working. He had to clean the post office. We just really didn't have a of time to visit and talk because he would... they would pick him up. They would let him off in the morning about nine o'clock and then they would pick him up for lunch and he would be gone an hour or so. Then they would bring him back.

K: Was he the only Prisoner of war you had dealings with?

R: He was the only prisoner of war I had contact with. Just this one boy.

K: You didn't hear any discussions of other prisoners of war?

R: No, not only... but just the Italian prisoners. It was just what I heard, I didn't come in contact with them. I don't think there were any Italian prisoners at Biggs Field. They were all at Fort Bliss. They were all out there.

K: What did you hear about them?

R: Oh, they were allowed to go downtown. You could recognize them because they had to wear an armband. They had on their uniforms but they just had the run of El Paso. They wore armbands and you could tell they were Italian prisoners of war. That was really the only place that I saw them. I heard that they went to a lot of the parks to meet girls and I'm sure there was some prostitution going on from what I heard. But that's the main thing. That's what I heard about the Italian prisoners. They were hard to get along with.

K: Was it because they weren't as able to communicate in English or...?

R: Could be. I don't know whether.... I never did come in contact with any but I'm sure that's why some of them probably knew English and maybe some of them didn't.

K: What kind of impression did they leave? Was it favorable?

R: I don't think so. I was just a teenager but I heard people say they didn't have no business downtown. They should be kept on Fort Bliss but they run around. They let them out.

K: They were on their own?

R: On their own. There was no MPs or anything with them. I imagine MPs kept kind of track of them if they saw them up town or something but that's all I know about the Italian prisoners. I just didn't come in contact with any.

K: Dealings with minorities. Did you have a lot of dealings with, like, the American Indians? I mean...

R: The Mexican people?

K: Uh huh.

R: Well, when I went to Austin High School there was only three high schools in El Paso: Austin, El Paso High and Bowie. I imagine there might have been a dozen Mexican teenagers at Austin High School. Most of them, they lived in South El Paso or that school district of Bowie and they went to Bowie. There was a few more, I think, who went to El Paso High. There was just maybe a dozen that went to Austin in wartime, the 40s. But that's about all I had contact with was the ones I went to school with.

K: What did you think about them?

R: Well, what did I think about the Mexican people?

K: Uh huh.

R: Well... I know there was one Mexican boy in my class in my history class and he just delighted in getting girls into trouble. He didn't care if they were another Mexican girl or an Anglo girl. At that time, you didn't think much about race because there wasn't a lot of Mexicans in El Paso then. They stayed in south El Paso. I know he delighted in talking to you and the teacher thought it was was you or something. You know and he would say, "Oh, that was so-and-so talking with me." He delighted in doing that. I didn't have any problems in school with the Mexicans I went to school with. There would be some fights after the games between Bowie or Austin or El Paso High and Bowie. I know Mr. Wimberly, our principal, used to, "No fighting after football games."

K: Did you take part in any of the programs to help Europe? I can't remember... it was something...packages for Britain.

R: No, I didn't do anything like that.

K: Did it seem like it was fairly common for people to participate?

R: Yeah, the Red Cross or you had volunteers to do things like that but I did not. I was just too young. I was in high

school. When I was in high school, I was in the girls' quartet and the girls' choir at Austin High School. We used to go to Beaumont a lot and entertain and sing. It was a sad time because they brought the boys back wounded and if they were bed patients we would go around to the wards and sing. Otherwise, we would sing in their auditorium. We would go around to their beds and sing in their wards if they couldn't get up. Saw a lot of sadness when so many young came back injured.

K: About what year were you doing that?

R: Well from '42, '43, '44 and '45.

K: Did you do it on a regular basis or just as you had time?

R: Oh, maybe about once a week.

K: Once a week?

R: Uh huh.

K: Were there other groups doing that also?

R: Oh yeah there was other groups from El Paso High. They had groups that go out and entertained. You just sang and maybe put on a skit or something.

K: And did it help them any?

R: Oh yeah. It kind of boosted their morale.

K: Were your parents involved in any activity like that or...?

R: No, I don't think so. My dad worked for Southern Pacific and I know he sold bonds to the men down at the S.P. and he was also head of their credit union down there. My dad was a machinist but he was also-- I don't remember what they it-- where they could make loans and things from the credit union. I know men would buy some bonds. Oh, and I bought war bonds and war stamps at school and that was a good savings, you know. It was \$18.75 was a war bond and I don't remember the price of a stamp. You could buy a stamp, a war stamp. They were less than a dollar.

K: Did you just go to the office?

R: You buy them at school.

K: Did you buy them from the teachers?

R: You buy them in the office?

K: In the office?

R: Uh huh. The school office.

K: Did most of the students...?

R: Well, yeah, if they wanted. They did pretty good up there at Austin, selling war bonds.

K: Was your mother involved in buying or selling bonds or any...?

R: Not to my knowledge. I think Daddy bought some war bonds but Mother was a housewife. So, no I don't think she did any volunteer work that I remember.

K: Did you have the feeling back then that you were expected to go to work to help in the war effort?

R: No.

K: It wasn't something that you felt?

R: No, I was still in high school and the war was over when we got married. No I didn't do anything like that.

K: Did you notice changes in Fort Bliss? Maybe where you were, was that fairly close to...?

R: Yes. It wasn't too far from Lebanon Street out to Fort Bliss. It was more desert Austin High School and behind Austin High School or most of Fort Bliss was just desert. They didn't have homes there. It was just big rocks and sand dunes out to Fort Bliss. What you would do on Saturday afternoon, usually with a bunch of girls. Once we got our work done at home we had little chores we had to do on Saturday morning. We would get on the street car and go to town. You had to go to Kress's . Every Saturday we would go to a movie at the Plaza or the L and A. But all the movies then were war movies or sad. There were some musicals they had but a lot of them were war movies.

K: Were they changed frequently?

R: Oh yeah, every week.

K: Every week there was a new movie?

R: Oh yeah at the Plaza or the L and A.

K: So you would just go and see a movie, go down to Kress's with your girlfriends...

R: With your girlfriends...

K: And gossip.

R: And go to Walgreen's and eat a sundae or get a coke.
Usually had a date that night.

K: Well, you just had a busy time didn't you?

R: Uh huh.

K: So, the rest of the week was just spent with studying and...

R: Yes, didn't go out on a school night. Didn't date on school nights when I was in high school. Had to study and sometimes there would be something come up you would go to. School plays, maybe, we would go to. Went to all the football games, basketball games and so that was what we did. I went to all the football games. I loved sports and still do.

K: Did it really seem that the fact there was a war on affected how your high school was ?

R: Yes. One year in high school, the choir that I sang in had uniforms.... [tape runs out]

K: Okay. You were talking about the uniforms.

R: The uniforms. And a lot of times we were invited to sing at the Rotary Club or Lions Club downtown. They would invite us to lunch and then we would sing. We did a lot of that. Got to think back. It's been a long time. We were just normal teenagers. We always knew when someone was missing in action or killed. That was a sad time. I dated a boy that he was missing in action for a long time. He was hurt in Iwo Jima and his mother called me everyday to see if I had heard from him. He'd been shell shocked and he was in a hospital in Fort Worth. He was that close and we didn't know where he was. He lost all identification and didn't know who he was. And there were a lot of boys I went to school with that were killed in action. It was a sad time.

K: Was there a lot of discussion among the teenagers about the war?

R: Yes. Now if you had a government class you talked about the war in school. Your government teachers would talk about and we would discuss it in history class and in geography class and maybe some other classes. We would talk about the war. Read the newspaper.

K: Outside of class, did it play that much of a role in the discussions other than the losses?

R: Well, no not outside of class so much. You would talk about it at home. My grandpa lived in Childress, Texas and we would go up there and visit in the summertime. My dad worked for the railroad and we would get a pass on the train. That's the way we would go because you couldn't drive because you couldn't get gas. So you would go on the train. My grandpa, I think he kept his radio on all the time listening to the war news. Oh, he thought it was so sad.

K: And did you lose any family members?

R: No. No, I didn't. My mother's brother was wounded in Germany. His name is James Scott and he was in infantry and he was wounded. He was in the hospital a long time. We hear from him. I think he must have been shell shocked, too because he would be writing a letter and then all of a sudden, he would be talking about something you didn't know about or didn't make sense. And then he would go back to making sense again. That was my mother's brother. He was overseas but I didn't lose any family.

K: Did you have any brothers?

R: I had one brother.

K: Was he too young?

R: He was too young. He was only four, five, and six years old during the war.

K: Oh, he was much too young. (laughter)

R: Yes, he was too young.

K: Very much too young.

R: He went to on to play basketball at Austin High School. Outstanding student, my brother was. Very well liked and then he went to Texas Western and got a degree there. Then he went to A & M and got a Master's in physics. Then he went to the University of Maryland and got a degree in business. So he's pretty well educated. He's got a good job, too. He was too young for World War II.

K: Just get to listen to it rather than experience it. Were you the only one who dated soldiers from Fort Bliss?

R: Oh no, oh no. A lot of girls did. Wasn't many boys left your age. They had gone into the service.

K: It was the only option.

R: Well, I dated other boys besides my husband until we got serious. I dated high school boys, dated a lot of high school boys. I think I only dated one other boy in the service besides my husband and just for a few times. Then when I met my husband, we dated for almost a year and a half before we married.

K: With the involvement with the soldiers, was it through the Liberty Hall dances?

R: No. I met my husband at church and we go down to dances at the Liberty Hall but there were civilians there too. You didn't have to be in the Army to go to the dances down there.

K: Well, that is all the questions I have for you. Do you have anything else you would like to add. Any memories? Oh, I just told a fib. The two dollar bill that you were talking about last night.

R: Oh okay. Well when you went to Juarez, you had to have your money changed into two dollar bills. It seems to me like, if I remember right, that was the way they catch spies going across the bridge. You would go across over there and people who lived here knew that you had to change your money

into two dollar bills. I don't know whether if we have any two dollar bills or not. If we do they're put up that we kept. Servicemen had to have a pass to go to Juarez. I don't think we went over there too many times when we were dating or too many times even after we were married. Of course the war was over. Go over and get gas my dad did. Mostly you would ride the streetcar or the bus.

K: Was the service regular or more like it is today where you get to wait awhile before it shoes up.

R: You would get to wait in line to get some gas. You know a lot of people went over to get gas.

K: Over to Juarez?

R: Yeah, over to Juarez and got gas.

K: Because the supplies weren't plentiful.

R: Because they were rationed over here and you would run out of gas stamps. That was it for the month until the next month. You could only use so many stamps a month for everything not only just gas and you had to watch those things or you would run out of stamps and you would have to wait for another month. I remember when the war was over they

rang a lot of bells and fire engines and sirens and things downtown, when the war was over in Europe when it was over Japan.

K: Was there any other celebrating besides that that you participated in?

R: Well, that's about all they did?

K: THat's all they did.

R: Uh huh. A joyous Day I'll tell you.

K: I imagine.

R: That's why I think American people my age, some of them and I think the younger people of course don't remember it. You know least we forget what the Japanese did to us and what they did to our boys and what the Germans did to our boys and what they did to the Jewish people. It was terrible. You just heard so many stories when the men come home. One man said-- we were friends of theirs when he came home. He was in the Bataan Death March and it was a sad, sad story. I said, "Let's eat. I'm about to starve." He said, "Freddie, don't ever say that you're starving because you don't know what it is to be hungry." The way they did our

boys. They just starved them to death in those concentration camps, those Japanese did. They beat them unmercifully. I've seen pictures of it and I've seen pictures men have brought home from Europe from the gas chambers and from the ovens that they took after the war Oh my, the Lord will take care of Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin and some of those bad, bad people. The way way they've the Jewish people and everybody else. That's why sometimes I think we ought to be more of a Christian nation and get rid of some of the the evil, the old Devil. Greed is the main thing. I've Always felt that that was the cause of everything was greed. Want more. Want more. Just want, want, want. Want more land and rule people. That was my opinion of the war just greed.

K: And did you know any Jews here in El Paso?

R: Well yes. I went to school with Norma Zuckerman. She was one of my best friends. She played the mother in the part of.... Oh, what was the musical? She went into acting. She played a lot of T V parts but Norma Zuckerman was one of my best friends at Houston Grade School and at Austin High School. She went on to be an actress. Fiddler on the Roof. She played the mother in the movie of Fiddler on the Roof and a few years after that Norma died. But she was a Jewish girl and her dad lived her and her grandmother. Her mother

had passed away. She would go to church with me. Her dad didn't care. He didn't mind. She would go to First Baptist Church with me. But she was a dear, dear friend and she was a Jewish girl.

K: Did she ever tell you what she thought about the war?

R: Well, she just thought it was terrible, too. She was a lot of fun. I never will forget her.

K: One of the friends you would go and have a sundae at Walgreen's with.

R: Uh huh. (laughter) And she was a neat gal, Norma Zuckerman I don't remember any other. Didn't pay attention to nationality, really didn't. A friend was a friend, you know. And the Sayklays that had the grocery store, they were Syrian people and they were marvelous people. You wouldn't want to know finer people than the Sayklay people. I had a lot of girlfriends and boyfriends. I didn't pay much attention to their nationality. I didn't date anybody but Anglo boys. So, I was just glad that war was over. It took awhile to get back on, you know, to get things to be manufactured again.

K: Was there a very drastic change in El Paso from the way it was when you left and when you returned in the '50s?

R: Yes. They started to build and people moved into El Paso. It just begun to grow after World War II, El Paso did. Industry came in and then we moved to Indiana for twelve years from '46 to '57. We moved to Indianapolis and Tipton.

K: What brought you back?

R: My husband. International Dental Lab called him and asked him if he would come down here to work. He was working for a doctor in Tipton. We'd built a new home and he said, "Well, I've got to think about it. I've got to sell a home." They wanted him to come down and work in International Dental Lab and open a gold department do crown and bridges which they didn't do. They wanted him to head that department, crown and bridge department. So we sold a house in three days and were shocked that we were coming back to El Paso. Our daughters were in the second and fourth grade. They were tickled to death to get out of that cold weather, especially in the wintertime. They said, "Boy, won't it be nice to not have to wear these old snowsuits and boots and heavy clothes in the winter."

K: Was there any striking differences in the El Paso...

R: Oh yeah. The growth of El Paso. It had grown in that twelve years.

K: Do you think any of it was sparked by anything in particular?

R: Well no. Just some more industry moved in. You got your El Paso Natural Gas came in here and a lot of other big industries that brought people to El Paso. Your railroads were busy again, working and so it was just industry.

K: Before you left in '46 in El Paso did you start seeing the veterans coming back and working in jobs?

R: They could get their jobs back. Well, see I was gone twelve years and there was a big change. There was other high schools and other grade schools that was built. It just began to grow with industry coming into town, coming to El Paso. Because all you had... there was nothing east of Five Points. Not very much. Then they began to build Chelmont and then they built Bassett later on. In the last few years they built Cielo Vista Mall but that's a long time after the war. There was nothing past Alta Vista that would amount to anything. Pershing Drive went out a little ways. There was just nothing. Five Points used to be a busy place and so did Alta Vista but that was the end of town.

K: In the '40s?

R: In the '40s. And North Mesa Street didn't go very far out. Texas Western then was way out of town not near as large as it is now.

K: I think I'll let that be the end of the interview.

End of interview