

Institute of Oral History

Interviews

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Interview no. 265

Pedro Saucedo

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Pedro Saucedo (1911-)
INTERVIEWER: Bill V. Abilez
PROJECT: Class Project
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Former ASARCO and railroad employee.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; work experiences; discrimination; Mexican American supervisors at the railroad and their practices in dealing with other Mexican Americans and Anglo workers; dispute over wages paid to Mexican Americans at ASARCO; opinions about the Chicano Movement.

***The transcript of the interview has been translated into English by the transcribers.

45 minutes.

10 pages

A: Mr. Saucedo, could you tell us about your background, where you were born and where you lived?

S: I was born July 15, 1911, in El Paso, Texas, in what was and still is South El Paso.

A: Could you tell us where your parents were born, Mr. Saucedo? Were they born here in El Paso, Texas?

S: No, they were both born in México.

A: What kind of work did your father do, Mr. Saucedo?

S: He was just a common laborer. He had no skills to speak of. He worked at whatever there was.

A: After your parents moved to El Paso, Mr. Saucedo, where did you grow up?

S: Well, we moved to what was old Fort Bliss, off Doniphan road. It was called the barrio bajo, because there was a barrio bajo and a barrio alto. We lived at the barrio bajo, where my mother used to make tortillas to sell. My father died when I was very young. It was here in el barrio bajo where she met this man whom she married, Mr. Lucio Valdez. Since he was working at the Smelter we moved to Smelter Town, which was called barrio alto.

A: Could you tell us something about your education, Mr. Saucedo?

S: I didn't have much education to speak of. I only went to the 5th grade and I only went because my mother made me do so. I went to a school named Courchesne. We had to walk about three miles one way and I just flat got tired of walking to school, so I just quit school. However the company had a vocational school which was run by Mr. Carrasco. He was a very tolerant man and he taught us how to do different things. My brother Cruz went there too.

The company also had what we called the company store. Everything we needed was there. All you had to do was charge it and sign on the

dotted line. Like for Christmas the men would already be borrowing on their salaries for the months of February and sometimes as far as April or May, and here it was only November or December. The only money we received was about fifty cents because that's how much the hair cuts used to cost. The company did not have a company barber. So the company used to give you a big check, but only in paper because the amount was always the same--just fifty cents. One good thing was that we never had problems in getting anything, the company just wanted us to sign our life away. When the sons of the men who worked there grew up they were assured of a steady job, so as to pay off the debt which the father had accrued. And that's the way it went from generation to generation. We used to make a little extra money by going along as caddies to golfers in the El Paso Country Club. They used to pay us seventy-five cents for eighteen holes. Plus they used to give us a big lunch, which was really too much for one person. We had some good times working as caddies.

Mr. Carrasco really helped us a lot. When we didn't have money for the real necessities of life, he would dip into his own pocket and would give us some--not much, but still he would help us. Mr. Carrasco came up with an idea about starting a boy scout troop and asked how many of us would be interested in joining. Since the troop was to be outfitted we all volunteered to join. Heck, we were all barefooted and now we were going to have shoes, new pants, shirts, and the whole bit. So they took us to the Popular Department Store and we got suited out. When we got to the store, I was asked how many blankets I needed, and I told them two, since I was a cold blooded boy. Anyway, I got two

blankets. They showed us how to cook and make pies and a few other things. Some of us didn't learn anything, we were there just to pass the time and get the goodies that we could get. We had some good times.

There was not much vandalism or stealing, because we didn't have anything to steal from each other. Besides, if you got out of line a judge was there too. The judge's name was Mr. Dominguez. He took care of all the sentencing there was. A policeman called Mr. Fletcher used to round up all the drunks because that was all there was, no drugs or nothing like that. We had a good time. We had everything we needed, we had the company store and we could get anything we needed there. Mr. Carrasco helped my brother Cruz, who is an engineer in México, a lot. Mr. Carrasco sent my brother to Chicago so that he could study over there. When he finished he came back to El Paso, but he told Mr. Carrasco and my mother that there was no future for him in El Paso as a Mexican, and since he had been born in México he went back to México. There he married and most of his children now are also engineers.

One day Mr. Carrasco asked this friend of mine to get a ladder out of the tool room where I worked, because they didn't give me very hard jobs because I really didn't do too much. I didn't really have too much smarts. I just did plain labor jobs. At any rate Mr. Carrasco knew that this ladder could not come out of the tool room, but he wanted to see what this friend of mine would really do. So this friend of mine went and asked me for a hammer, a saw, and a square. Well, I was surprised to hear that from him, and I asked him, "Have they made you a boss?" He laughed, and answered that he was supposed

to get that ladder out, and since the ladder could not come out of the tool room in one piece, my friend thought that if he took the ladder apart he could do it. Well when Mr. Carrasco got back and saw what my friend had done. He threw the new cowboy hat he had just bought in town on the floor and stepped all over the hat, just because he was so mad.

Well, Mr. Carrasco was a very nice man. Once in a while we still get together and talk about those old times. Mr. Carrasco would check on the guys at night to see if they were doing their homework. The company also provided good things for us such as the vocational training, because most of us were good only for odd jobs. However this type of training did help us, and some of the best mechanics came from Mr. Carrasco's school. Mr. Carrasco also had girls and he used to teach his girls how to cook, mend and other things that girls do when they grow up and get married. He had about twelve girls he used to teach.

Not to long ago the company donated some land for a monument honoring Mr. Carrasco, and I believe that some of our names were in that plaque that was erected here in El Paso. It was erected along the same place Mr. Carrasco used to teach school. I believe the company did a good thing by placing a small monument in honor of this great man, Mr. Carrasco. He really did do a lot for all of us.

A: Could you tell us a little about your school activities, Mr. Saucedo? For example, how did you spend a typical Saturday or Sunday--that is to say, when you didn't work?

S: Well, we really didn't have much to do. There was a Y.M.C.A. close by that used to show us movies. The Y.M.C.A. was at the barrio bajo and we had to walk down there. Other than that we

could also caddie and make ourselves and extra seventy-five cents for eighteen holes, plus that one big lunch we got. We could also go to the plaza and watch the people there. We didn't have any money to speak of. The movies at the Y.M.C.A. were free so we were to go there more often and there we could also take a shower.

A: Mr. Saucedo, could you tell me about your first employment?

S: Well, I started working at a lumber company for ten cents and hour. I used to work there ten hours a day. One day (Sunday), I just didn't wake up in time to go to work, and when I got there, the boss (white) said that I no longer had a job. I said, "Okay, you're the boss." I took my lunch box, got my time paid and went home. As luck would have it there was an electric plant going up and I managed to get on with them. I started to work for twenty-five cents an hour. Then it went up to thirty-five cents an hour until it got to fifty cents an hour. But then a question arose as to why we, the Mexican-Americans, should get fifty cents and hour, that that was too much money for us (Mexican-Americans), that we didn't need that much money. I really didn't like the way they treated us because they (the boss) really favored the white guys. They (white guys) got the easier jobs, while we got the dirty ones; and that happened very often throughout the day. I didn't like it so I just told them that they could keep their job, got my time card and left. I went and told my step-father what I had done. He told me not to worry, to just go with him and he would get me a job.

Well, I started working at the smelter as a painter's helper and I stayed there until the Depression started to come upon us. I was

laid off and I just couldn't get anything. I stayed off work about three years. About 1935, my step-father got killed in an accident at the smelter and we received about \$8,000, with which my mother bought a house. And the rest of the money, my mother put it in the bank. I went to work for the smelter again about 1935. I got married, and my mother gave me the money to buy the house in which we now live from the money we received from my step-father's accident. Then my wife said that the house was too big and that she was afraid to live in it by herself. So my mother sold her house and bought half of our house from us, and she stayed there until she died in 1967.

I went to work for the smelter again for two dollars and forty cents a day, and I saw that the conditions had not changed. I told the boss I was going to quit because I needed more money, and since they couldn't give a raise and the work was real hard, I just told the boss that I was going to look for something better. He said, "Okay, here's your time," so I went home. My real chance at a better job came when the war got started and I went to work for the Southern Pacific Railroad. One good thing the railroad has, and that's good foremen and supervisors. However there was much discrimination against us Mexican-Americans, but that was expected. The Anglos always got the better jobs, however I got along with all the bosses. And even though we were harassed by the Mexican-American supervisors, we managed to give them a few white hairs. We got the worst jobs. The ones that had the most danger were assigned to the Mexican-Americans; however, the same wages that were paid to the Anglos were paid to us. We only had a few Mexican-American supervisors, and this was not too long ago

that they were made supervisors. For a long time there were no Mexican-Americans as supervisors, even though they knew the job or knew how the job was supposed to be done. The Mexican-American supervisors always got us to do more work for them, more work than what the Anglos put out.

A: How did the supervisors treat you--that is, comparing the two, say the Anglo against the Mexican-American?

S: Well, the Anglo always treated me better than the Mexican-American. That's why I always preferred to work for an Anglo supervisor. They treated me better. The Anglo stood by you in certain things or they would back you up. The Mexican-American didn't stand up for you; they often just let you go see the boss by yourself and they were afraid to see the boss themselves.

A: Did you have means to get back at these supervisors that treated you bad?

S: Oh, yes. We used to go out and check a train, and when it should take about an hour to finish, we used to take twice as long then hide. The supervisor would come looking for us and kept looking, but we just let him go on searching. The supervisor would get mad as heck, but they couldn't do anything because they couldn't fire us. Then the boss would give them heck for not finishing the train on time. We had to work to please the supervisor even if it was not the best way to do the job. Once we had to take oil to the head of the train, some sixty cars away. We could have started right where we were, but the boss said we were to start at the other end, so we did it. But we did it because we had to, not because it was the best way.

- A: Mr. Saucedo, do you remember World War II and could you tell us something about it?
- S: Well, I remember that there were a lot of Cuervitos /Tittle black crows, meaning black people/, all over the place. You could see their big eyes and shining teeth all over the place. These folks were just waiting to see if they could get jobs.
- A: In regard to the Chicano Movement, what is your opinion on the subject?
- S: Well, I believe we are very disorganized. There is no unity in our race. I remember when I first came to work here at Southern Pacific Railroad, a fellow co-worker did not want to tell me which track was which. All he said was, "You'll know, you'll know." This guy was Mexican-American, but do you think he told me what to look out for? Heck no, he just didn't volunteer anything. I believe he was afraid I was going to take his job away. I believe some men at one time wanted to burn the Popular Department Store, and I don't go for this. I don't believe in this kind of thing.
- A: When was the first time you voted, Mr. Saucedo?
- S: I started to vote about 1933. I had to pay one dollar and seventy-five cents for it. But some folks didn't want to pay for it, they believed they should have been able to vote for free. There were some politicians that used to pay your poll tax if you voted for them. This was somewhat of a common practice; there was no one to watch out for things like that.
- A: Mr. Saucedo, why do you think that there has been few Mexican-American representatives in politics?
- S: Well, because it goes back to the question of unity. There is no unity.

We do not cooperate with each other. We try to get at each other instead of helping each other. The pride that has kept us down is still there. I have gotten more help at work from Blacks than from Mexican-Americans.

A: Do you remember a Mexican-American political leader here in El Paso?

S: Mr. Raymond Telles, I believe, got the Mexican vote by pulling us together. He did a lot for the Mexican-American.

A: Could you tell me when and how your family came to El Paso?

S: Well, my parents came to El Paso because of the Revolution and because there wasn't any agricultural work for my father.

A: What did your parents think of Juárez-El Paso when they first got here?

S: Well, they liked it. My mother liked it because it was big and it offered a better opportunity, a better place my father could find work.

A: Can you tell me when you first heard the word Chicano and what it means?

S: Well, I first heard it about three years ago. Everybody was saying Chicano, but I really didn't use it much. We would throw the word around when we would get together and joke, but that was the extent of it.

A: What do you think about the Chicano Movement?

S: Well, like I said before, if we could only come together and cooperate with each other, then we could certainly do better.

A: What about illegal aliens?

S: Well, they take jobs away from U.S. citizens. I don't like it at all. I believe they should go back and do it the right way, under the rules and regulations of the U.S. government. The first thing they do is to get on welfare and other federal funded programs so as not to do any work

but still get all the benefits. I think the government should step in a lot more and get rid of these illegal aliens.

A: Mr. Saucedo, I really want to thank you in behalf of Dr. Oscar Martinez of the Oral History Department for your contribution. I know that this information will be appreciated by the History Department.