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Interview no. 223

Jose A. Estrada

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: José A. Estrada (1941-)
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 27, 1976
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TRANSCRIBER: Sarah E. John
DATE TRANSCRIBED: April 28, 1976

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

U.S. Customs Inspector. Born in Ysleta, Texas in 1941; attended schools in the Ysleta School District; military service in the Army; has worked with the federal government in different capacities for several years; currently is an inspector for the U.S. Customs Service.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; Anglo/Mexican relations; experiences in the Army; work experiences with private companies and the federal government; experiences as a Customs Inspector; attitudes toward the Bicentennial; views on the Chicano Movement and bilingual education.

1 hour, 15 pages

This is an Oral History interview with José Estrada, an Inspector with the U. S. Customs Service in El Paso, Texas. The date is April 27, 1976. Interviewing is Sarah John for the Institute of Oral History at U. T. El Paso.

J: Mr. Estrada, could you tell us when and where you were born?

E: I was born in Ysleta, Texas in 1941.

J: Could you give us a little background information about you parents?

E: Both of my parents were born in San Elizario, and they went to school [there]. They met when they were real young; [they were] childhood sweethearts, and they married. In fact, my dad was only 16 and my mother was 17 when they married. They lived in San Elizario where my two older sisters were born, and then they moved to Ysleta. My dad used to be a farmer in San Elizario, and then he bought a farm in Ysleta. But he couldn't really raise us on the farm, so he went to work for the Waterworks. At this time Ysleta was not incorporated with the city [of El Paso]; it was independent. So it was kind of small and it had its own water system. I was born in Ysleta, and then we moved back to San Elizario. Actually I started school in Ysleta in kindergarten, and when I was in the first grade we moved back to San Elizario. I went to the second and third grade in San Elizario. Then we came back to Ysleta again, so I completed my grade school education at Ysleta Grade. As far as my parents' education, my mother has a sixth grade education and my dad has a seventh grade [education].

J: Can you tell me a little bit about what life was like while you were growing up in the valley?

E: I was born and raised on a farm, so I wasn't brought up with [a lot of] people. We were living out by ourselves on the farm. It was really interesting. It was a different experience living on a farm [from living in] a city. I loved horseback riding, and just living on the wide open spaces. In fact,

the only time we came to the city was on Saturdays. We used to live in Ysleta, but in the farm areas. It was a big thing for us. All the kids would come out to the big city--Ysleta--on Saturday afternoons to what used to be the Texas Theater. I used to be in expectation of Saturday to go to the movies, because that was the only time we could [see them]. This big thing then was going to the movies.

J: Did other kids that you went to school with also live on farms?

E: There were quite a few that lived out on the farms. Some were Anglos, some were Mexican Americans; so I have friends [that are] both Anglo and Mexican. We used to get along beautifully.

J: Was that the rule? Did everyone seem to get along at that time?

E: I think so. Of course, I'm talking about [when we were young, in] the late '40's. In grade school I got along real swell with all the kids. But I remember one incident while I was growing up that I'll never forget. All the little gringuitos and the Mexicans used to run around and play [together]. One afternoon, we were over at this guy McNutt's house. We were all playing cowboys and Indians, you know--Bang!Bang! His dad came up after work (this was in the afternoon) and he said, "Okay. Get over here. I want to talk to all of you." I believe at this time I was in the seventh grade. Boy, he chewed us all out for taking up his little boy's time. Right in front of us, he started telling [his son], "I don't want you to be playing around with Mexicans. If they don't have anything to do, if they don't have to study, you are not going to grow up like these Mexicans." In other words, he was degrading us. At that time, I didn't really know about discrimination. I just didn't know what to think. He just chased us off. But at the time I didn't really think about it. Later on I started thinking, and boy, it made me mad.

J: Is that the first experience that you had with any type of discrimination?

E: I basically think of that as being my first experience [with] discrimination.

J: When you attended elementary school, were there any experiences that stand out in your mind from that time? Your class was mixed at that time, right?

E: Right. At this time, Ysleta Grade School was predominantly Anglo. I don't remember any dramatic experiences. I was on the basketball team and the football team; I've always been athletically inclined.

J: Where did you go to high school?

E: I went to Ysleta High.

J: What experiences did you have at Ysleta that stand out in your mind? Were you still involved in sports at that time?

E: I started when I was a Freshman. I played a little bit of football, and I loved basketball. But it was predominantly Anglo, and by this time when you get to high school you get the better athletes from all the grade schools. Of course, the coaches would give the preference to the Anglo kid. I just felt left out; I was sitting on the bench most of the time [during] our first three basketball games. I said, "Oh, heck. I don't want to be a bench warmer." So I just quit the team all together. But I think that if I had really tried, I could have made the team, if I had been given the chance.

J: So there was a bias on the part of the coaches themselves in that they would choose from the Anglo students and ignore the Mexican students?

E: Yes.

J: Are there any authority figures that you remember, teachers or principals, who might have had an effect on you, either good or bad?

E: I think my English teacher in the Sophomore year, Mrs. _____, was an outstanding figure in that she was always willing to help me. In fact, I remember this one semester, the first exam we had I got a C. She took me

over [to one side] and said, "You can do better than that. Do you need any help?" I remember the very next exam I came out with an A. She was so proud of me. I think that seeing her be proud of me made me want to do better for her. I think that's the only class that I came out with an A in high school.

J: There weren't other teachers that did that kind of thing?

E: Not really.

J: Did you have any Mexican American teachers while you were in high school or grade school?

E: When I was in San Elizario, second and third grade, I had Mexican American teachers. As far as Ysleta Grade or high school, I don't recall any Mexican American teachers.

J: Do you remember if there was any mixed dating while you were in high school?

E: That I recall, there was not any.

J: What was the relationship between Anglos and Mexicans at that time?

E: When I was in high school, I still didn't fully realize or understand discrimination. But most of the Mexican American kids would run around with Mexican Americans, and Anglos with Anglos. When I was younger, we used to ride our horses together. In fact, I played guitar, and we used to get together and play guitar. I hope I didn't give you the feeling that when Mr. McNutt came up and chased us away that we didn't associate with his son anymore. We did; at least I did. We still had a pretty nice relationship after that. Of course, we called the Anglos "stompers" and the Mexicans "pachucos." But I never associated with the pachucos or the stompers. I was kind of in the middle.

J: Were most of the kids like that, or did they separate?

E: There were quite a few of us that didn't go either way. I guess it's the same way today.

J: After you left high school, what did you do?

E: I graduated from Ysleta in 1959. My dad had a company of dump trucks, so I went to work for [him] right out of high school.

J: How long did you stay with him?

E: I worked [for him] about 6 months. My dad called me one night, [and we] had a little discussion. We started talking about the future, as far as what my plans were. He started to encourage me to go to college, but I didn't want to go. None of my friends were going to college. So he advised me to look into the military or doing something else besides "driving that truck for the rest of your life." I'm grateful that he did. I enlisted in the Army. I was sent to basic training at Ft. Ord, [and] after that I got into the military police on-the-job training [there]. From there I was sent to Korea. [All together, I was in the Army] for a year, and [I got discharged for medical reasons].

J: After you got out, did you come to El Paso again?

E: I came back to El Paso, and I [began working] for the Hanley Paint Company. I feel that I got really good training there. While I was working for Hanley, I started going to Durham's Business College. I feel that at Hanley's and Durham's is where I started forming the basis for where I am now, not that I'm so high up there. [At Hanley's] I started in the plant, mixing paint, and from there I was promoted up to the shipping room. From the shipping room I went to the office. While I was working in the office, I got a call from Glidden Paint Company. Somebody had recommended me to the manager [there]. He invited me out to lunch and so forth, and he made me a better deal as far as salary and training. I was with Glidden for about 3 months. Before this, I had made applications with Civil Service, [for] both White Sands and Ft. Bliss. They sent me a letter from Ft. Bliss inquiring to see if I was still interested in working for them. I went up there and

and I was hired the same day. I came back and told Mr. Fox, who was the manager at Glidden, and he was kind of [upset, although] he was nice about the whole thing. He thought that if it was going to be for my benefit, [I should] go ahead. I started working at Ft. Bliss in 1966. I started out as a GS-3 clerk, [but after] about a year I got promoted to Records Managing Officer. I did several things, such as inspecting records and personnel files.

J: Did this happen to most of the other kids that you went to school with, or were you the exception to the rule?

E: I think so. I think I've been lucky. Somebody up there must like me. I forgot to mention [that] while I was going to Durham's, I met my wife. She was a student there. I feel very lucky to have met my wife, because she's a very nice [lady]. I think I'm very, very lucky to [be working for the government]. I took the FSEE exam while I was working for Hanley, [and] I felt fortunate that I passed the exam, because I knew a lot of guys who had completed college that flunked the exam. Anyway, Ft. Bliss called me in 1966, and I went to work there [until] 1970, in different capacities. I got several promotions while I was out there. I got good recommendations and several awards of achievement and so forth [there]. While I was at Ft. Bliss, I started attending UTEP through the guidance of the education officer over there, Mr. William Key. I really appreciate what he did for me. As a matter of fact, he got me registered here. He almost took me here by the hand. I'm very grateful to him.

J: So he's the one who got you interested in going back to school?

E: Right. That was in 1967. Ever since then, on and off, I've been attending UTEP. I'm majoring in Business Administration with the Management Option. One day while I was in the SUB, they had this Career Day. They had people from the Border Patrol and Customs, and several other places. I remember I went to this desk where the career officers were, and I got to talking to one of the recruiters from Customs. I asked him what the requirements for Customs

[employment were]. He told me [that] one of the basic requirements [was] that you had to take the FSEE test. I told him that I had already passed the test, [so] he told me to see Mr. Fisher, who at the time was the Chief Inspector for Customs. I took his advice and went and saw Mr. Fisher. I was trying to get away from Ft. Bliss at this time, because there was a reduction in force going on, and there's not much security [because] you're reduced in force or reduced in grade. All that was taking place at Ft. Bliss. So I went to La Tuna, the Border Patrol, and Customs right about the same time. When I went to see Mr. Fisher, he wasn't there. I called several times, and Mr. Fisher was never in. I was determined to think that they were trying to give me the message that, "We don't need you." But I kept calling back. Finally about two weeks later I got a hold of him. I told him, "I would like to make an application for employment with you." He said, "Can you come down this morning? I can interview you." I was up at Ft. Bliss, and it took me no time to go up to my supervisor, who was really a nice person--Joe Smith--and I told him, "I'm going down to Customs for an interview." He was really glad. He said, "Oh, go ahead!" So I came out to Customs. I started talking to Mr. Fisher; he gave me an application to fill out. [When I was finished], he started looking over the application. He said, "Can you come to work for us next Monday?" I think this was in the middle of the week. I said, "I'd like to give a two week notice where I work now, because they've been nice to me." He said, "Well, I'll let you give them a week's notice, because we need you right now." So I started working for Customs in 1970. The funny thing about it, to show you how political [it is] to get into government service, I got a lateral transfer to Customs from Ft. Bliss. But before this, I had already submitted an application to Houston through the mail. But this was really funny, I think: I had been working for Customs for about 4 or 5 months, and I get this application back from Houston. It said, "We are grateful that you are seeking

employment with us, but at the moment there are no vacancies." And I was already working here in El Paso!

J: When you began working with Customs, did you feel that you were being treated equally on that job?

E: At the time, I really felt that I was being treated equally. When I came to Customs, I started as a guard. When I made my application for Inspector, even though I was already in the Customs Service, people were being brought in from the outside without any Civil Service status to fill Inspector positions. So I made a formal grievance through our union, through Congressman White. I'm really grateful to Congressman White. He took action, and I was promoted to Inspector within a very short time after I made my grievance. There are discriminatory practices within the Service.

J: Have you been the victim of these practices yourself, or have you seen other people who have been victims of these practices?

E: I don't feel that I have been discriminated [against] personally [after this event that I just described], but I have seen other guys that I felt were qualified to be promoted to certain positions, and they have been overlooked. This is my own opinion.

J: Do you think that there are ethnic and racial factors involved here?

E: Race and sex both have to do with the discriminatory practices.

J: How many Mexican Americans are working there now?

E: There are quite a few, but I don't know the exact number. In relation to how it used to be even 10 years ago, [the number has risen significantly]. For example, we used to go to Juárez or Zaragosa frequently [when I was a kid], and I remember there were no Mexican Americans working on the border at all.

J: Are there any Mexican Americans who are in any supervisory positions right now?

- E: There are a few. In fact, just within the last 3 years, we've gotten 2 supervisors who are Mexican Americans and we've gotten one Senior Supervisor who is a Mexican American. We also have what we call Senior Inspectors, and I believe there are 3 who are Mexican American.
- J: Have you had any interesting experiences while you have been working at the border?
- E: There are quite a few. I don't know if you realize this; a lot of people don't. In fact, I didn't realize this til I went to work at the bridge [myself]. There are separate agencies [there]. There's Immigration, Customs, and Agriculture. Most people think it's one big agency. We have to train [for the other agencies also]. I work for Customs, but I'm trained for Immigration and Agriculture. It's designated on paper if nothing else, that I'm an Immigration Inspector and a PQ Inspector. And vice versa; the Immigration and Agriculture inspectors are cross-trained for Customs. A lot of incidents have happened with Immigration problems; there are several. The thing that I can think of now is that people who are coming back from Juárez [who are] from out of town are not used to coming through the Inspection Point. They just can't figure out what's going on. I'll ask these people to declare their citizenship, and they'll say, "Oh, my God. I left it at home." Or "I'm Mr. Smith and this is Mrs. Smith." But as far as really unique experiences, I don't really remember any. I have been involved in several fights; of course, not too many of those, [because] we try to keep those down to a minimum.
- J: What are the fights about?
- E: Normally [they're with] people who object to being inspected. The majority of the people who come through the bridge are very, very cooperative, very nice. I like to treat people like I would like to be treated. I try to be as fair as I can. But there are some people, that no matter what you do, no matter how nice you try to be, or what you do, you're not going to satisfy them. And

they're not going to do anything to help you do your job. Actually, [that's] all we're doing--enforcing the law. We get in trouble with people who refuse to open their trunk. A lot of times, these people refuse to open their trunk for a reason. Either there's contraband there, [or something else]. Last night, I had one fellow that threatened me, said that I was going to lose my job, that he was going to report me to the [Service]. He was a Mexican citizen. Anyway, it's a policy that no matter what, if you ask an individual to open his trunk, it has to be opened or his car remains there (and he remains there) until such time as it is opened. After this fellow threatened me so much, he probably thought that [I wasn't] going to give up. He had a whole family of illegal aliens [in his car]. But like I say, most people that refuse to open their compartments or trunks do it for a reason.

J: Have you ever been offered a bribe?

E: Yes.

J: What did you do in that instance?

E: The only time that I remember being offered money was when I was interrogating this individual who had come across with a local card. He was driving a nice new station wagon; he was well dressed. We are authorized to look through anything in the car or on the person at the bridge, because we don't come under Constitutional Law, we come under Maritime Law, which allows us to search without a warrant. I was looking through his papers and I found evidence where this fellow had been working in Chicago. I was going to take this fellow to the office and turn him over to Immigration. He says, "Wait a minute, wait a minute! I'll give you \$50.00 if you let me go." I said, "Okay, let's go over to the office." He was happy, because [he thought that I was going to accept the bribe]. I went in there and told the Immigration officer, "This fellow here has been working in Chicago, and he offered me a \$50.00 bribe." He lost his local card and he was prosecuted for offering a bribe to a

federal officer, which is a federal offense.

J: What happens to these people if they are caught?

E: If they are prosecuted, they can receive a jail sentence, plus a fine. If they are a local carder, they can lose their cards.

J: Is there any stipulation that they can't cross for a certain amount of time?

E: Once they lose their local card, they cannot come through. I believe they have to wait a year before they can even apply for another card.

J: Have you ever been propositioned by a woman in order to try to smuggle goods or persons across the border?

E: Funny enough, the latest smuggling that we have encountered has been [by] females. Most of them are young, attractive, and showing a good portion of their body when they come through. I was telling my wife today about an incident that happened last night. I was working on one of the vehicle traffic lanes, and a girl came through in [a Ford]. I like to check Fords because they've got a big trunk. You could put a bunch of stuff in there. This girl got out, and boy, she had nothing on, almost! She messed around and opened her trunk, real nice. So I checked under the seats and the trunk, because I'm suspicious any time I see a girl now. So I'm checking this girl out, and she says, "Boy, you're really giving me the treatment tonight." I said, "Oh, it's just routine inspection." She said, "And I'm so tired tonight. I just got off of work." I asked her, "What kind of work do you do?" She says, "I work over at the _____ Topless Restaurant. Why don't you come down and see me sometime? I'll give you good service. I'll even give you a sneak preview of what you'll see." She pulls down what little [clothing] she had on up there. I said [to myself], "She's not trying to pull anything on me," [because] I had searched the whole car by this time. I said, "Okay." I told my wife about that today, and she just [wondered what kind of thing goes on at the bridge]!

J: From what you have seen, what is the most popular thing being smuggled across the bridge?

E: There are seasons for everything. Whenever they harvest the crop of marijuana in Mexico, they'll ship a whole supply of it to Juárez, and they get people to bring it over. There's a certain time of the year when there's more of a supply. I believe the latter part of the year is when we get most of the marijuana cases. But there's also a few smuggling cases of liquor, mostly for personal use. There used to be a lot of it for commercial use. There's also hard drugs coming through. As far as illegal aliens, we don't get too many through the bridge. Most of the smuggling of aliens is done up and down the river. Of course, the same with drugs. This is my personal opinion again. We work our tails off trying to prevent contraband from coming in to the country, and yet up and down the river it's wide open, not manned. We don't have personnel to man it. In fact, we don't have enough personnel at the bridge. Everybody complains about the long lines. In comparison to other ports, we have no personnel here for the amount of traffic that we get from Mexico. For instance, in Tijuana, they've got twice as many inspectors in Tijuana for one bridge. Here we've got the Córdova Bridge, the Paso del Norte Bridge, and the Ysleta Bridge, and we have half the work force that San Ysidro has for one bridge. So that goes to show you how politics enters into this business. Laredo [has] one bridge and they've got more people than we have here in El Paso. For some reason, they have never been able to get the personnel that's required here in El Paso.

J: That's changing, isn't it?

E: Personally, [I think] with the elections of Congressmen going on, they have been getting people left and right. If you notice now when you go to Juárez, more of the lanes are open [when you come back]. But what actually happened, they have gone out and hired 40 temporaries. These are not permanent personnel.

Since this whole thing started, I think they have hired 6 permanent inspectors but we have to take into consideration that we get retirees, we have people transfer, and we have people just quit. About two weeks ago we had a guy throw his badge in the trash can and go home. Then we get 40 temporaries, and this is my personal feeling: I bet as soon as these elections are over, they're going to tell these 40 temporaries, "Okay, 'bye." And we'll have the same amount of people or less [on the job]. Our work load here in El Paso is very [large for the amount of personnel that we have].

J: That's very interesting. I wanted to ask you if you've ever been refused by someone to be checked out because you were a Mexican American and they were Anglo?

E: Yes. In fact, almost every day it gets to the point where everybody comes across, you check them out, and it's always the same thing. "You checked me out 'cause I'm Mexican," or "You checked me out 'cause I've got long hair," or "You checked me out 'cause I'm black," or "You checked me out 'cause I dress funny." But I try to be as fair as I can. Nowadays you don't really know who is smuggling and who is an honest citizen, because they all look alike. In fact, I've had people tell me, "Why do you check us? You should be checking the criminals." I tell them, "What does a criminal look like?" And they say, "You've got training. You should know what they look like." Not really; you can't really tell by looking at a person. You can tell more or less by the way he acts, maybe. When I'm on inspection duty, I ask questions like, "Where are you from?" or "What do you do for a living?" All this is interrogation to see the reaction of a person. Even a smuggler will react [normally, sometimes], and vice versa; a person that's just as innocent as can be will get nervous while they're being questioned by a law enforcement officer. So it's really hard to distinguish [between] who a lawbreaker is and [who is not].

J: I wanted to know if there have been any Anglos who have come across the bridge

who didn't want you to inspect their car because you were Mexican American.

E: I had several occasions where they looked down on me, especially during the Rodeo in February. We got all these cowboys here from East Texas, and back there there is still a lot of discrimination. They don't want anything to do with Mexicans. Anyway, this one night I'm standing at the bridge, and I asked these 4 fellows in the car to declare their citizenship. They were really insulted. [Among themselves], they said, "Look at this damn Mexican asking us for our citizenship." I wouldn't mind if they had said it to my face, [then I can do something about it]. But it's the same thing on the other side. You get Chicanos through here, and they say, "Pinche Chicanos. Once you put them in any position they think they're it." So when I started here, I felt I was in the middle. You ask a gringo for his citizenship and he says, "Who the hell are you to ask me for my citizenship? What do I look like?" That's a popular answer. I got in trouble one time for answering, "I'm not allowed to tell you what you look like, just tell me your citizenship." I was reported to my supervisor for saying it! [Laughter] But we get it from both the Anglo side and the Mexican side, for being [either] "Damn Mexicans" or "pinche Chicanos." But it doesn't bother me, as long as I feel that I'm doing a good job; and I will keep on doing a good job. The pay I'm getting there, I don't think I would be getting anywhere [else] here in El Paso.

J: When did you first hear the word "Chicano?"

E: I remember when I was a little kid I would hear the term Chicano, but then it had a different meaning. If anybody called me a Chicano, it was fighting words. It was a dirty word then. But now, I think it relates to a certain segment of society. I don't think anything bad about it now. In fact, I believe that if it hadn't been for the Chicano Movement both militant and non-militant, I wouldn't be in the position where I am now. That is the only reason that the minorities have been given an opportunity to enter these fields--

because of all the noise that has been made.

J: What are your feelings regarding the Bicentennial as a Mexican American in 1976? Do you relate to any of the so-called "founding fathers" of the country, such as Washington, Jefferson, and Adams?

E: I do. I am really proud to be an American citizen. I relate to myself as a Mexican American, but I really am a proud American. I really relate to these heroes.

J: Do you relate to any historical figures in Mexican history?

E: In this area, the ones that we hear the most of are Pancho Villa and Zapata. I've always related to Zapata and Abelardo Gutiérrez.

J: Do you carry on any Mexican customs in your home?

E: As far as the home itself, it's quite a mixture. My wife is a Mexican American, and our food is Mexican food. But as far as the home itself, it's got more of an Anglo atmosphere.

J: Do you speak Spanish at home?

E: Some.

J: Do your children speak Spanish?

E: Yes. My children all speak English and Spanish. When I went to school, I didn't know any English, and I remember I had [a lot of] trouble. So we have taught [our] kids to speak English first. I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but my wife and I decided that we were going to teach them English first as the basic language. But we also teach them Spanish. My third daughter [is] just as [fluent] in Spanish as in English, [because of the Bilingual Education program in the public schools]. She is totally bilingual. My older daughters are more dominant in English. [But] I feel that it's a good thing for my kids to learn both English and Spanish.

J: I want to thank you very much for the interview. It's been very interesting.

E: Thank you.