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Interview no. 609

Richard Ross

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Richard Ross (1942 -)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: Unrestricted
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 30, 1977
TERMS OF USE: 609

TAPE NO.: 609
TRANSCRIPT NO.: _____
TRANSCRIBER: Irene Ramírez
DATE TRANSCRIBED: July 2, 1981

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in San Antonio, TX. His mother was in the movie business.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Joined the Marine Corps and due to an accident was discharged honorably in Houston. He has dedicated most of his time doing sketches. He especially finds pleasure doing so in México, due to the typical decorations and customs. He relates his experiences in an encampment in México.

Length of Interview: 20 minutes Length of Transcript: 11 pages

RICHARD ROSS
by Oscar J. Martínez
July 30, 1977

M: Richard, let's begin this interview with a little personal background-- where you're from, where you grew up, your parents, where you went to school.

R: I grew up in San Antonio, Texas. My mother was in the movie business and she married several stunt actors, and I grew up between San Antonio and Santa Barbara, California. And I guess that's where I got a lot of my imagination to draw, because I was around people in the acting business.

M: Can you tell me when you were born?

R: 1942, San Antonio.

M: And where did you go to school?

R: Well, I went to school at Grammercy on Woodlawn Street only until the sixth grade. I didn't go any further than the sixth grade.

M: Where did you spend your teenage years?

R: We had problems at home, and what I did I guess when I was about 14 I ran away from home. And at the age of 16 I joined the Marine Corps with a special waiver, and I stayed in the Marine Corps for six years. So basically my teen years were in the Marine Corps.

M: When did you first come to the border?

R: I liked the border when I joined the Marine Corps. When I was 16 I came through El Paso going out to San Diego, MCRD, and I found this to be an interesting place, passing through it. That's when it first stuck.

M: When was that? What was the year?

R: I was 16 years old, so 16 to 1942...

M: Fifty-eight.

R: Yes, right, '59 actually. Right, it was 1959.

M: How long were you at Fort Bliss at that time?

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R: No, I was in the Marine Corps.

M: So you were just passing through.

R: I was just traveling through. I was here for about five or six days en route to boot camp.

M: And you did your basic training out in Camp Pendleton?

R: Yeah, where I went to Tijuana many times to do sketches.

M: Oh, you were already into drawing at that time?

R: Oh, yeah. I drew for the Marine Corps for six years. I drew for all the service magazines. I was the artist that did the Iwo Jima flag, the big Iwo Jima flag that's in the officers' and generals' mess hall.

M: Out there at Camp Pendleton?

R: Camp Pendleton, yeah, Main side. I did all the art work.

M: Do you recall the first time you went to Tijuana?

R: Yeah, I guess. We had been three months in boot camp. You know, you can't get liberty in the Marine Corps. After three months everybody went across the river. It's only 13 miles.

M: What did you do the first time you went to Tijuana?

R: I went crazy. I took a camera and I photographed and photographed. At that time, as you know, in '59, they had the old Mexican lure--the donkeys, the hats, the old signs, Carta Blanca, Cruz Blanca, and all I did was photograph. I imagined...imaginary bars, the longest bar in the world, pictures of Pancho Villa. I wanted to capture these things before they...I had a feeling they were gonna go, 'cause you could see that they didn't like the image that they had had there.

M: Was that a time when a lot of the soldiers went down there to have a last fling before they went on to their permanent assignment?

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R: Yes, they did. And half of them, at that time they were arresting about 40 percent of everybody that went over. And I went over for six years and I went the other way. I got to know all the federales, the police chiefs, the customs inspector. And everyone would go over to get a girl and get drunk, and I would go over to sketch and talk to people. And so I had a little rapport with them. Not on the other side like other people did.

M: What did you do with your sketches?

R: At that time I didn't think of making prints and selling them. I just drew them and threw them away. I was fantasizing more. I wished I could make a living at it, but I didn't think it was possible--except for the Marine Corps, drawing for them. Which was at that time, \$99 a month wasn't much.

M: You were doing this just as a hobby then? Saving your sketches.

R: I didn't save any from Tijuana, unfortunately, or Hong Kong or any of the cities. I drew Tokyo. I did better work probably when I started out 'cause you're less, you know, tight. When you go along you become tighter in your work. I didn't save any of that. But I saved the mental pictures. There're a lot of companies, beer companies, wine companies, in Mexico that are no longer in existence, or signs have been torn down depicting the Mexican image. The guy on the horse drinking Bacardi, all of these things are gone. I remember all of those and I use them in my drawings.

M: When did you first start making drawings for prints?

R: Well, now, I did have a backlog of drawings I did in the service, but they weren't Spanish. They were country scenes as you see here. When I got out of the Marine Corps, it was in 1965, I got run over by a freight train a week later after getting discharged honorably, in Houston.

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M: How did that happen?

R: Oh, I wanted to go into wrestling promoting in México. I had some contacts and I was training in Houston, learning the bookkeeping business, the ins and outs. And I had a job all night where I worked for a milk company. It gave me time through the day to talk to all the local promoters and get financial backing. And I got hit by a freight train delivering some milk one morning, early in the morning, crossing the tracks.

M: Were you badly hurt?

R: Yeah, I was in and out of the hospital for a year. But when I was in the hospital they paid for it, but I didn't have enough money to do little things like buy Cokes or drinks. I would sit and sketch they skyline of Houston. A nurse came in one day and took it and ran it down and had 200 copies printed up and went through the hospital, and at two bucks a whack came back with \$400 in about five hours. So that gave me the idea.

M: Of making prints?

R: Yeah. She had...I'd never even thought of an angle like that. All the doctors would wait for new skyline scenes. And I would go out and buy clothes and medicine and whatever and didn't have to be dependent on the railroad or insurance or the hospital. I could pay my own way.

M: When did you first start making sketchings of Juárez?

R: Gosh, about four, well, it was about five years ago, about five years ago. I was doing good in Austin and San Antonio, but I came here and decided that I'd better capture the Pancho Villa, some of the Mexican feeling before it's completely gone, which it already is. The trolleys are gone, the big signs on the border that said, "Welcome, Amigos, to México" are gone. Everything is changing. The decorations they used to have across the

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streets. They used to have arc lamps. Villa Acuña was famous. Every block had "Welcome to México" in Villa Acuña. They're all torn down. The old bullrings are going. Nuevo Laredo, all over, they're tearing down the wooden bullrings and putting in mammoth new places. And just the old feeling is going. But I think I've got enough material to make it look realistic.

M: You came back here with the expressed purpose of doing that then?

R: Yeah. But getting something that I've never gotten into, and I haven't done it yet. I've still been a little gun shy and nervous, worried about how the people'd feel about it. But I don't think they're gonna mind. I'm gonna get right into the cantinas and the whorehouses and how people live really off beat and draw them on the spot. Instead of taking photographs, I'm gonna stay there, take a tape recorder with me (I draw to music) and take the Mexican music from there and then sit on the spot and create on the spot, the real feeling of culture, which I don't think anyone's done. I don't mean downtown, I mean maybe way out in some of the smaller places and going to the cantinas. Something I've always wanted to do, but it just... you have to have a rapport with the people to do it. I want to go into the Santa Rosa Prison. I've talked with them and sketched some of the old-timey block cells with some of the characterizations of prison.

M: Have you ever thought of going to the La Tuna prison?

R: I have. The warden is--or was, unless he's changed in two years--is a very good friend of mine. He's given me permission to sketch La Tuna, full permission. I went out there not long ago to do it and I'm very busy and I haven't gotten back. They let me go past the gun turrets. Of course, everything's on radar. And when I moved too quick with my pen, they have

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loud speakers in the ground, a loud speaker would say, "Mr. Ross, please move slower. Do not move so fast, because we have our guns on you and they are radar controlled."

M: What kinds of personal experiences have you had as you have gone into these Mexican border towns to do your work?

R: I guess the most interesting thing I ever did was when I worked for Dr. Salinas for four months in Múzquiz. He has a million and a half acre ranch, and I did art work for him. And he was with Pancho Villa and all of his artifacts with Pancho Villa. And because of that, you're familiar with Mexico and you do certain things, you get certain forms you fill out which give you more of a free hand to travel through México. And I'd had something signed by the governor of Coahuila and then by the Salinas family and gave me freedom to travel through the state of Coahuila and do sketches of the different places he wanted. And as you know, there're five or six checkpoints from Piedras Negras all the way to the new highway to Chihuahua City, and the letter would get me through. But what was interesting, they would look at the letter usually, and like I was a gringo, they'd throw it back at me, ask me what I had in the trunk of the car. When they saw the pictures I drew, then they would mellow out everytime. And there was times when federales would give me their lunch or go get a coke or we'd sit and talk maybe four, five hours at a Customs point station. And I got to a point where I didn't fear the...like a lot of Americans where they have a kind of a fear when they come up to a checkpoint or what's gonna happen.

The funniest thing is when I came across one time with too many prints. I was gonna sell them in Wilma, Texas, where Marlon Brando made all of the

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Pancho Villa movies, and across the river's Mier, which is next to Camargo where the Mexican government's made over 200 Western movies there. I went across there to do some sketches and I had five or six hundred sketches. And you could tell they were to be sold. And the captain of the Mexican side took about 50 pictures himself. Didn't buy them, just forcibly took them. But then I sat down [and] I signed to everybody in his family. And because of that they let me kind of do what I wanted to over there. And that's the night I stayed three nights and three days in Boy's Town. You don't have Boy's Town in Juárez, 'cause Baja California and Chihuahua don't have organized prostitution, but they do in the other states. And they have encampments 10, 15 miles out. You have a little circle. And I just went out there and got a room and lived to see how the other side of the girls are and how they relate to what they're doing.

M: Can you tell me about your three days in Boy's Town?

R: Yeah. I found that the girls were starving to death to just to talk to somebody on more of a generalized basis than just sex, and that a lot of them had children that you didn't see. And of course the government takes so much money from the bar and the girls themselves only make about one tenth. If a girl brings \$80 dollars, she's lucky to see eight or nine dollars. She gets her room free, but has to pay for her meals. And because of the energy they expend, they eat...they really do eat steaks. Now I didn't believe this, but there's a catering service within the system that you don't see. And they have steaks and they don't eat junk, because they have to spend a lot of energy. So all their money goes to eating, and they themselves don't keep a lot. And rouge, makeup, lipstick. I went into town and bought

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simple things like that which would cost 50 cents and a dollar, and they would be nicer to me than if I gave them a \$50 dollar bill. And I found them to be generally very honest and very kind to the children that they had in the area that you didn't see, the guys didn't see. But they did, they all had their own children. So it was just a different...

M: Were these girls from the interior?

R: Yeah. I noticed one thing. A lot of the younger girls, I don't know if there's an age law (there is over here), a lot of girls were 14 or 15, they seem to have come up from the interior but on their own free will. Nobody was like you hear about, shoved in by federales, a gun put to their head, and not allowed to leave. They can't leave the encampment by federal law. They can go to mass, they usually have a church. If they don't have one there they allow them to go in town. But they can't shop and they can't mill around as long as they're doing that. Now, they can stop anytime they want and get back into the mainstream of life, but they're not allowed into the mainstream of life when they're in the encampments. Like you will not find, under the new encampment in Nuevo Laredo which is the largest in the world, you won't find a prostitute in downtown Nuevo Laredo anymore. It's punishable by a prison sentence. Everything is five miles out and it's huge. It's about six blocks by six blocks, and you have to go through a federal checkpoint, too. They check you for guns, dope, ammunition or whatever, then they let you on through. And they do the same when you leave. Everything is federal prices--the girls, the drinks, the gambling. Everything is controlled by the federal government, although the bars are privately owned. It seems to be working great. Crime is down, VD is almost unheard of. They have doctors, they have nurses on the spot every time. That's part of the service, two dollar service, the nurse does come in.

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And the girls are checked. And supposedly, I met a Dr. Martínez there who checks, he says he checks every girl twice a day, not once. He said that they really would do it, so I believe him. And they shoot them with penicillin, two hundred and something thousand units a day.

M: Did it cost you a lot of money to be there three days? What was the deal that you worked out?

R: No. I just...one of the bartenders liked my artwork, and instead of paying for a room for an hour I paid I think \$2.50 or \$2.80 a day for a room. And I ate with the girls' catering service. I think I paid two and a half dollars for a big steak, and I got good meals. And I got a lot of pictures. I took hundreds of pictures. And the only thing that scared me was the police in the area liked the idea when they saw my drawings, but it was kind of shaky at first. 'Cause I was reported one time by 20 different people to the police, actual complaints that I was making fun, taking pictures of people. But it was pretty well cleared that it was okay to do it.

M: What kinds of pictures were you taking?

R: Oh, really not so much the girls, the cantinas. As you know, Villa Acuña's red light district was the old federal barracks, 1880. And they have the swinging doors and the gas lamps and the whole works, and it's still there. It's getting ready to be torn down. The government's gonna tear 100 percent of it down. And it's a sight to see across the river from Del Rio. And I was more interested in the buildings and maybe how Pancho Villa used to ride through there, and the girls would, you know, big roses in their head. And all that's gonna go like Nuevo Laredo, and a new encampment will be built. Everything will be modern. But they have some famous clubs in Villa Acuña, the Shamrock and different places that have real history to them.

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- M: You were interested in the physical structures and capturing the essence of the lifestyles there and what went on.
- R: The lifestyles. And the most interesting thing, the characters that live there, when people live on wine after a while they get into a characterization role, and there's a lot of that in a small town, border town. You know what I'm getting at. People that ride, still ride horses. One guy comes in, comes in with his horse to get a drink of tequila. You know, they playact. They seem to enjoy their roles that they're in.
- M: Have you made a lot of sketches from those pictures?
- R: No, that's just it. What you've seen, there's more buildings; I haven't gotten into the people. I've been a little bit reserved and shy. No one has really done that. It's good to stay in México for a few hours, but when you're there for a while or you're focusing your point on a certain person, you draw attention, and I now have the nerve to do that. As you get older you get less fearful 'cause you know how to do things the right way. It's easy to get thrown in jail over there, very easy. In fact, there was a jail in Villa Acuña where the jailer...they have, what do you call it, spasmodic jails all over town. One of them wasn't taking much money, there wasn't anybody in jail, he was actually selling tamales...(Laughter)...out of the jail, which I took a photograph of that. I thought that was good.
- M: So you've been in jail down there?
- R: No.
- M: Oh, you haven't.
- R: Oh, no. I've never even, never come close to it. Although I've had friends who have. One guy with the Houston Chronicle that was with me lost his left eye photographing peasants on the streets. And I've had my camera

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smashed and my face hit real hard. I took a photograph of some peasants begging, I didn't know the building behind me, it was in Múzquiz, the building behind me was a federal prison. [You] couldn't tell it. And the guard came from out of the middle of nowhere and hit me with his rifle butt, and it smashed my camera. And nicely looked at me, said, very softly, "I've saved you from a fate worse than this by doing this." Then he went on. What I guess he figured is that I was being watched, and that saved me from being hauled in and going through all the mess. He had to do that. So possibly he was being kind. But they didn't put up with any picture-taking of federal installations. I didn't know that's what it was. I also saw a federal stop one time in front of a smelterworks in Palua and force all 250 people to shave on a creek. They hadn't been shaving and changing their clothes. There's a federal inspection station going on into México where everyone has to pass, including the people who work at the smelter. I went through it one day, and he got mad at everybody and he had cans of shaving lotion and razors, and he had 'em all strung out across the creek, shaving. He said they weren't allowed to come across his inspection station till they were clean.

M: Richard, I know you have to go on to work, so why don't we stop here? Next time I see you, I don't know when that'll be, next time I see you, why don't we just continue the conversation?

R: Okay.