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Interview no. 201

Lorenzo Alarcon

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Lorenzo Alarcon
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martinez
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 10, 1975
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Member of pioneer family of San Elizario, Texas; lifelong resident of San Elizario; former Superintendent of Schools in San Elizario, retired in 1966.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; Salt War of 1877; life in San Elizario.

45 minutes, 16 pages

Lorenzo Alarcon
April 10, 1975
By Oscar Martinez

M: We usually start these interviews asking a person to tell us a little bit about when they were kids. What do you remember about your childhood.

A: About my childhood?

M: To get some background about you.

A: Well, I was born here in San Elizario on February 17, 1901. I have lived here all my life except when I went away to college.

M: Were your parents from here?

A: Oh, yes. They were born and raised here. And my great-grandparents were born and raised here. We're all from here.

M: Your family goes way back then?

A: As a matter of fact, my great-grandfather became an American citizen automatically when the State of Texas was annexed to the Union and they all lived here. On both sides, my father's and my mother's side, so I have lived here all my life, too.

M: That's real interesting because you don't find too many people who go back that far, whose roots are here from the very beginning.

A: My wife come from the same family. We're cousins. I had to pay a license to marry her. She's Concha Garcia and my mother was Garcia also. So her father and my mother were first cousins. I went to school here, graduated here. Then I went to International Business College in El Paso and they were short of teachers here and they came here on a weekend and the school trustees requested me to take one of the classes. They were short of teachers. So I did. Then they requested me to become a teacher. You might say I became a teacher by accident. I had planned to become a lawyer.

Alarcon

I studied a little law. I did go to teachers' college in Huntsville, Texas, the state teacher's college. I went there two years.

M: And when was that?

A: That must have been in 1918, something like that, 1919. Then I came here and got a job here at the school. Like I tell you at the beginning, I was a teacher for 3 years and when the superintendent died, they made me the superintendent. [And I was a superintendent] until I retired in 1966. I have been retired about 8 years I imagine.

M: Let me backtrack a little bit because this is very interesting that your family goes back many decades here. What do you know about your great-grandfather and your grandfather?

A: Well, my great-grandfather, Captain Gregorio Garcia, he was in charge of the people here in San Elizario when they fought the Apache Indians on their raids. They made him Captain. Captain Gregorio Garcia was my great-grandfather on my mother's side. Then Don Ignacio Alarcon was my great-grandfather from my father's side. And like I told you at the beginning, Captain Garcia became an American citizen automatically when Texas was annexed to the Union -- when was that? 1845.

M: What did he do for a living here?

A: He was a farmer, yes. He was a farmer and was also a member of the first El Paso County Commissioners' Court. That's my great-grandfather from my mother's side, Captain Gregorio Garcia.

M: How did they feel about becoming part of the United States?

A: Well, all right, I guess.

M: They didn't mind? Did some people leave here and go to the other side, not wanting to become part of the ...?

A: Not that I know of. Texas became independent in 1836 and remained

Alarcon

independent for ten years and in 1845 annexed to the Union. At that time Texas was a part of the state of Coahuila, Mexico, and my great-grandfather

M: And as far as you know, most of the people here in San Elizario stayed here?

A: No. They stayed here.

M: Did your grandfather ever talk about the Anglos here and the relations at first between Anglos and Mexicans?

A: Of course, my grandfather was the son of my great-grandfather and he was a very prominent citizen and one time he ran for district clerk in El Paso but he lost the election and he became mayor of this town when we became incorporated. He was mayor for a good many years.

M: When was that?

A: He was mayor, it must have been in 1910. He started to be mayor in about 1910. He was mayor about 10 years, I imagine, in this community of San Elizario. My mother was postmistress or postmaster for 28 years here in San Elizario.

M: You mean with the post office?

A: Yes, with the post office.

M: Did your grandfather ever talk about the Salt War?

A: He played a very prominent part in it.

M: What part did he play in it?

A: He was on the part of the Rangers. You know Mr. White...my grandfather was a Ranger himself. But his brother was with the rebels, Mr. Segundo Garcia. Tradition...well, no not tradition, my grandfather told me that himself: His brother shot him on the head because he was fighting on the other side. Salt War lasted for 15 days and most of the fighting was...took

Alarcon

place where that little building is, the clinic. Where the clinic is now, that was the headquarters for the Rangers. So Mr. ? So that got Mr. Howard, Mr. Charlie Ellis--Mr. Charlie Ellis was married to my aunt, Tia Juana Alarcon--and the fighting lasted for 15 days until the troops came from the Fort over near El Paso. You know at that time Fort Bliss was in another place, down near that smelter there.

M: Oh yes, the old Fort Bliss.

A: Uh huh, the old Fort Bliss. They sent the troops from there. The rebels fled to Guadalupe, Mexico. As a matter of fact, some of them remained there; some of their descendents are still living there in Guadalupe. And you know what was the cause of the Salt War? That took place in 1936.

M: No, that was in the 1870s.

A: 1870s when the Salt War took place? Uh huh.

M: Where were these salt mines? Are they close to here?

A: Yes. Have you been to Carlsbad, New Mexico?

M: A long time ago, when I was a little kid.

A: Well, you go to Carlsbad, New Mexico, they call it Salt Flats. That's the name of the place now. You still see the lake there, but I don't think there's any more salt in it unless you dig deep down. You know the salt lakes were donated to the people of San Elizario and Socorro. They used go there and load their carts or the wagons with salt. They took the salt either to San Antonio or to Chihuahua, Mexico, and exchange it for commodities. For shoes, clothing, and so forth. I think Mr. Howard came here and some how or other got a concession for the lake there and he tried to sell the salt. [Chuckles] And that's what the people resented because they used to go in and get the salt free, you know. And when Mr. Howard was trying to charge for the salt, there was resentment on the part of the people and started a revolt

Alarcon

against Mr. Howard and Mr. Charlie Ellis who sided with him. And they both were killed and they were buried there in what we call the ____ today. That used to be Mr. Charlie Ellis' place, the ____.

M: Were there many Anglos living here at that time?

A: Not at that time, just a few. In fact there are very few living here today.

M: It's always been mostly Mexican here.

A: Mostly, I'd say 90, 95 percent.

M: What about your father. What business was he in?

A: A farmer.

M: Did he have a farm?

A: Yes. I still own about 25 acres of one of his farms. My father died when I was only a year and a half, a year and three months, he died. So my mother, being a widow, she had to sell some of the land and some of the cattle because my father owned a cattle ranch near Fort Hancock. And my mother, of course, to make a living, she had to sell the cows and some of the land.

M: Did your father get the land through a land grant from his own father?

A: That's right. Through the government. The government was giving away land at that time.

M: Which government was that?

A: The United States, of course. My father got that land that way. And they had a ? company in San Elizario, a big branch there that belonged to the ? Company.

M: How much land did he get through that grant?

A: Over here, you mean? Almost 25 acres from the government. They bought this other place from somebody or other. You know at that time, land was cheap.

Alarcon

M: I was wondering if your family perhaps had a grant from the Spanish government or through the Mexican government before this area became part of the U.S.

A: The only grant that the king of Spain made to the people of San Elizario and Socorro was Las Tierras Prietas, and that's where the salt lake was located, in Las Tierras Prietas. And that's between the Carlsbad road, that highway there, you go through there and on the right hand, there you see the lake.

M: But there were no individual land grants given?

A: I don't think so. The salt lake, the entire salt lake, the Tierras Prietas, belonged to all the people, the community, all the people of San Elizario and Socorro.

M: And the lands around the town also belonged to all the people?

A: Right.

M: Did your father die of natural causes?

A: Pneumonia.

M: He must have been really young?

A: 27 years old. My father died when he was 27 and brother died at the age of 27 and my mother died at the age of 69. So I have outlived all of them, my father, my mother, and my only brother. Very young, yeah. My father and brother were very young.

M: What kind of a community was this? What was it like here when you were a child?

A: A farming community all through the years since I was born and a long time before that too. A farming community. And I'll tell you this much. Sometimes their crops failed for lack of water. You know, Elephant Butte didn't exist at that time so the men from here would go to work in Arizona,

Alarcon

in Morenci, Arizona,... in Douglas, Arizona, in all those place, in the mines. They couldn't find jobs around here.

M: Did they leave their farms?

A: They left their farms for awhile. Most of them left their families here.

M: What was the problem with the water?

A: The only problem with the water was that some years they didn't have much rainfall, you know, so they depended on the rainfall for their crops.

M: How about the river?

A: (Chuckles) Well, the river was dry if there was no rain! That was before the Elephant Butte.

M: I've read some writings about the farmers in southern Colorado and New Mexico taking too much of the water out of the Rio Grande and leaving very little for the people down here.

A: That may have been the case, I don't know.

M: A lot of people have trouble farming down here. Did that change with the Elephant Butte dam?

A: Oh, yes. After that we've had water for sure.

M: What about wells and pumps?

A: Well, they didn't have those at that time.

M: They didn't. The school that you went to, is it this school over here, the same one?

A: No. It was Portales over here. Portales was the first public school in El Paso County. And Mr. ? Larizoldo was the first public school teacher here. A very bright man. He went to El Paso with his family and became a district clerk there. Then he became the district attorney, and finally he went to New Mexico and became governor of the state of New Mexico and in his last years he was a senator in Washington from the state of New Mexico. A

Alarcon

very brilliant man. And he came here from Parral, Mexico. The bishop there sent him to college in Santa Fe. That's where he got his education. Then he came here and married a lady here by the name of Dona Rosalia ? . He had some family with Dona Rosalia ? . She died and he became a widower and then he married a first cousin of my mother, Dona Maria Garcia, and he had a big family with Dona Maria Garcia also. He was considered a great orator only second to William Jennings Bryan. You know who William Jennings Bryan was. He was the number one orator in the United States, and Mr. Larizoldo was considered second only to him. And that was a nice picture in the museum over here if you wish to go there.

M: And he ran the school that you went to, is that right?

A: No. When he was teaching there I wasn't even born.

M: He left before you started school, I see. Well, how was the school that you went to?

A: Well, I went to school here at Portales but under another teacher. Mr. Larizoldo had left.

M: A Mexican teacher?

A: Well, he was an American citizen, of course. Of Mexican origin. Then when Mr. Larizoldo left, Mr. Jose Perez, another man from here took over as a teacher but I was still too young. When I was I started here with a man named Mr. Page, Mr. Page.

M: Were there any Anglo students in your school?

A: Yes, very few. I imagine two or three of them.

M: They were the minority?

A: Oh, yes.

M: How did they get along with the Mexican kids?

A: You know. When you treat people ? it don't matter whether it's an

Alarcon

Anglo or Chinese. In the beginning you kind of fight with them but as time goes on you learn to get along with people. Even Kids learn that.

M: So you don't remember any problems of an ethnic nature?

A: Well, we used to have a fight, yes.

M: How long were you in that school here?

A: I entered at the age of 7 years and I finished the eighth grade. It was just an elementary. Then I went to El Paso schools, over there.

M: How long were you there?

A: Well, let's see four years of high school, two years in a business college, six years altogether.

M: You went to El Paso High School?

A: Yes.

M: And then you went to the business school?

A: Yes. International Business College.

M: I see. Well, at El Paso High School, Mexicans were the minority there, weren't they?

A: Oh, at that time, certainly. They were in the very clear minority. In fact, Spanish-speaking, the Mexican people didn't have much regard for higher education at that time. Now it's different. You take, for instance, Ysleta High School today you hardly see Anglos there. Most of them are Mexican or Spanish-speaking children. (Inaudible)

M: How do you remember your days at El Paso High School?

A: Well, I had many friends. I never had any trouble. I wasn't a number one student, but I was an average student.

M: Did the Spanish speaking students mix well with the non-Spanish speaking students?

A: Oh yes.

Alarcon

M: You don't remember any problems?

A: None at all.

M: How did teachers treat the Mexican students?

A: They were nice. As far as I know, all my teachers were nice. Very few Spanish speaking teachers at that time, I may say none. There were no Spanish speaking teachers in that building, like you find today. There are many today.

M: What about that business school you went to. Was that run by a Spanish speaking person?

A: No. It was a private school, the International Business College, and the name of the professors there, there were two brothers that owned it. The Mullins. They were very nice. I remember them with gratitude, I must say. They gave me a good part of my education.

M: And did they have both Spanish speaking students and Anglo students?

A: Right.

M: But was it mostly Anglo students?

A: Yes, at that time. Just like I told you while ago, at that time Spanish speaking people didn't have much regard for higher education. Some of us hardly ... Well, I don't include myself. Most of them didn't even finish grammar school at that time. They dropped out at the third or fourth grade level.

M: Why did you go on for higher education? What was the difference in your case?

A: Well, I don't want to brag about myself but you know I was a member of the most prominent families in this community. We were prominent from [the time] of my great-grandfather. Until now I'm living very nicely. I'm not very rich; I don't want to be bragging about myself that way.

Alarcon

M: Well, it was natural for your family to go on and get an education and become someone in the community.

A: I started to be a lawyer. That was my vocation to begin with.

M: Why did you change your mind?

A: I told you while ago. Because one weekend day I came to visit my mother here and the trustees were short of teachers here and they requested me to help, to take over one of the classes and I did. And they must have liked my work 'cause they requested me to study for teaching. So it was the trustees that made me make up my mind to become a teacher.

M: Well, you must have liked teaching enough to have switched

A: Substituting there made me like teaching. I did like teaching very much, especially when they made me Superintendent. The superintendent of the school district and the principal of the school at the same time, see? I helped pretty well.

M: Going back to when you started being superintendent, how many students were you in charge of, how many schools?

A: There was only one school.

M: The elementary school?

A: The elementary school, yes, that's all.

M: And how many students?

A: Around 300. See, this community hasn't grown much. It has been around 300 all through the years.

M: And how many teachers did you have?

A: Well, at times I had ... the most I had was 12 teachers. Most of the time I had only 10. It was a small school.

M: To cover 8 grades?

A: Right.

Alarcon

M: Was there a kindergarten?

A: Not at that time. Not at the beginnings. Later on, there was, but not at the beginning.

M: Were most of your teachers Anglo teachers?

A: Half and half.

M: Half and half?

A: Uh huh.

M: From the very beginning?

A: No, from the very beginning most of them were Anglo but later they became about half and half.

M: Did the Spanish speaking teachers get along well with the Anglo teachers?

A: Oh, yes. Very nicely. Never had any problems.

M: Were the Anglo teachers good in teaching Spanish speaking children?

A: They knew very well that this was a Spanish community, you know. They tried to be nice to the children and likewise they tried to be nice to the parents.

M: Was this part of the El Paso school district or an independent school district in Texas or how ...?

A: I'll tell you. There used to be a county superintendent for many years. I taught under the county superintendent. He had his office in the courthouse until they did away with that office. He had charge of all the schools in the county.

M: How is it now?

A: There is no county superintendent.

M: This is an independent school district?

A: Most of them are. They're all independent now. Ysleta, Clint, Socorro, San Elizario, Fabens. We had to be independent since they did away with the

Alarcon

county superintendent.

M: Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

A: Well, people thought it was a bad thing they did away with it. (Laughs)
They thought it was useless to be spending all that money to be maintaining that office there.

M: You got your funds directly from ...?

A: The state of Texas, yeah.

M: Did you get enough funds?

A: Oh, yes. We didn't have any trouble getting enough funds to run the schools.

M: Enough equipment and supplies?

A: Right. At that time there was not as much federal aid as there is today. Today the schools are getting federal aid to do a lot more things than we used to.

M: What about the curriculum in the schools? Were things like Mexican history taught or the history of the Spanish speaking children here?

A: Not at that time. No. This bilingual program they are stressing that more and more. But in those days they didn't even permit the children (laughs) to speak Spanish on the school ground. There was a rule to prohibit them using other languages other than English at that time. But it's different now. They are stressing the idea of the bilingual now. They even require some of the teachers to be bilingual.

M: Do they require teachers here to be bilingual?

A: Not necessarily. But they do have ... Most of the teachers today are Spanish speakers here. More than I used to have. I used to have 50 - 50, but now they have more Spanish speaking teachers. And those Anglos that speak Spanish, too.

Alarcon

M: So I guess the schools have changed a lot then.

A: Just like the other schools. All the schools have changed a lot. Education has changed all over the country.

M: I wanted to ask you about the community in general. You say it hasn't changed very much. Have the Spanish speaking people always been in control of the local political system?

A: We used to have a justice of the peace and constable here for many, many years until the county made all this...you know, they divided the lines. But until then we had a justice of the peace and constable here for years and years. Today all the school trustees are Spanish speaking, all seven of them.

M: What do most of the people who live here do? Are they connected with agriculture?

A: Most of them, yes. Most of them and many are employed at Phelps and Dodge, the refinery. Lot of people work there, and also many ladies and young men go to work at Farah, Farah Manufacturing in El Paso. The older people, most of them are farmers.

M: Most of the land around the area that's farm land, has it been owned by Anglos or Spanish speaking people?

A: The Spanish people used to own most of it. My grandfather on my mother's side, he used to own I might say all of Clint. The land where the church is located, he donated that place for the building of the church, and he owned most of the farm lands there and down here at Fabens most of the land there at one time was owned by the ? and most of the land not only here but have you been to ? ranch? That was owned by the Estacion. The Estaciones used to own land where this theater is, the Adobe Horseshoe. He had a big store there and he owned a lot of land around here, Estacion.

Alarcon

M: And somebody else owns it now?

A: Well, it belongs to the company, the company that owns the Horseshoe. The Mexican people still own small pieces of land. Like myself, I own 400 blocks and I own the 15 or 25 acres down below. I inherited it from my mother who inherited it from her husband, my father, and I still own it.

M: But would you say that most Mexicans don't own too much land anymore?

A: Not big farms, not like they used to.

M: It's mostly in the hands of the Anglos, the big farms?

A: The big ones, yes.

M: Did they come in and buy it off the Mexicans?

A: Yeah.

M: Why did the Mexicans sell?

A: (Laughs) They want the money!

M: They would have been in better shape had they ...

A: Yeah, but they didn't realize that at that time.

M: With farming being such a big activity here in this area I guess there have been a lot of wetbacks here.

A: They're not allowed to work anymore. Oh, the men come here, I don't know how, and work but you see the officers every day with their cars full of wetbacks; they chase them away. They put 'em on the other side of the river today; the next morning they're back. (Laughter)

M: In your school, did kids from these wetback families attend your school?

A: Well, no. Yes, a very few, I imagine. Very few because, you know, when they take the parents, they take the children too. They got 'em out of school. Take them back to Mexico.

M: So then there are very few wetbacks in San Elizario living here permanently, would you say?

Alarcon

A: Those who are living here are not wetbacks anymore. They're legal residents. They wouldn't be living in the United States as wetbacks.

M: Well, there are many people who just don't have papers and have been living here for many years, maybe not in San Elizario but in Fabens for example. I was talking to a professor who's done a study there and there are many families who just don't have papers but they've been there for many years. I was wondering if there was a similar case around here.

A: There may be a few.

M: Working for Anglo farmers?

A: Right. But if the officers find out, they go after them. (Laughs)

M: I can't think of any other questions to ask you right now.

A: In relation to education, of a general nature?

M: Education, general questions, I've kind of asked you what I had in mind.

A: You care for the history. Well, let me show you something.

M: Your activities in the democratic party here.

A: Well, I had been the local democratic chairman in San Elizario which is Precinct 81 now--they've been changing that from time to time--and I'm going to hold the election the second day of this month and I'm very interested in that election because it's about amendments that relate to teacher retirement and I'm a retired teacher, as you know. They raised our pension or retirement if you wish to call it just recently and I'm getting \$72.11 more than what I used to get.

End of interview