

Part I Armando Rodriguez Interview February 13, 2011

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RICHARD GRISWOLD: Armando could you tell us about your family in Mexico and how it was that you came to the United States?

ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ: I was born in Gomez Palacios, Durango, Mexico, September 30th 1921. As the seventh of eight children born to Andres and Petra Rodriguez. Six of these children died at birth or soon after. (unintelligible) about how they died or when they died. The oldest was born in 1900. The next three were born about two years apart and then, four years later, a boy was born. Then four years later a girl was born. Then I was born in 1921 followed by my brother Carlos in 1925. He was born in March or April 1927. My oldest brother Chon was accused of stealing money from a local sports organization where he was working. My father, knowing his son, knowing his son was innocent, decided to send him to the United States, San Diego, California where Dad two sisters and mom had one ex-sister in law living in San Diego. So they sent a group that consisted of Chon, his wife Maria and their first born daughter. Along with them were my two older sisters, Hermalinda, Josefa, both single, and my brother Andres. My father did not want him to go through the system of justice as practiced in Mexico, knowing that his son was innocent. After starting the process for clearing Chon's name, my father arranged to move the rest of the family to San Diego to bring the family together. After a short stay in Juarez, and El Paso of about two weeks we were off to San Diego, California.

The family was divided among two families to accommodate the housing needs of ten adults and one baby. There was space available between the two houses. They were all very helpful They were able to accommodate our needs for about two months while the family found employment. During this period I and my sister Catalina attended Lincoln Elementary School that had special classes for the foreign born. It was very helpful for about three months. The family found work and gathered enough money to rent a house that was situated about fourteen blocks away.

It was a good move. I was forced to learn English and communicate at school as well as playing in the neighborhood. It was here that I started my education. After a few days I was moved from kinder to the first grade where I was almost at grade level. Almost the same size as these students I went with these groups of students through high school. In 1933 after completing Memorial Jr. High I went to the tenth grade at San Diego High School as a tenth grader. This was after I had completed 7th, 8th, and 9th grade and had started to learn in different rooms with different teachers different subjects. In another room and teacher I was also introduced to the way high school operated. One of the major differences for me was distance from home. The junior high school was five or six blocks away while the high school was about three miles away. We walked to our school almost every day except a few times for reason of a special emergency when I rode the street car.

In high school I became very active in sports. My first activity was football where I was not the same weight or height but I have no trouble with this. The next year the coach set up new standards for team members requiring that they meet a certain weight and size. I was relegated to the junior varsity and the Grizzly Bears, the local neighborhood team played football games at Navy Field. This became a great chance for me to meet a new coach and learn from him. That influenced my life. Frank Crosby was the coach that taught me to wrestle but who also taught me how to live my life to its fullest while being

considerate and respectful of others. Frank Crosby was a true guide in my life. (Unintelligible) and I were there when he was the vice principal of Memorial Jr. High and I was a visiting teacher. We worked together very well.

When I was at San Diego State University I went out for the football team. I went out to play weighing about ten pounds more than when I went to play at high school. But now I was allowed. I made the first string of the varsity team and was in the full season. After the first season I was called into the office of the director of athletics. His name was Bill Peterson. He said I want you to coach wrestling for me. He said that I had been recommended by the high school wrestling coaches. He said there were many students asking for you. I said yes, but I wasn't sure I could do this and carry a full load. I wanted to be.... After all I had been away from school for four years in the military. I knew I needed help to mature and pass my classes. He was ahead of me and said he would provide tutors to make sure I could pass my class requirements. He thought I could succeed in my classes. In addition I would get student wages and parking privileges. My classes went from 7 am to 12:30 I would go to practice and then I would go home where I would work in neighborhood house from 5 to 9 p.m. Study was weekends and any time I could get it in. It was tight but I managed to do it. I was able to complete my requirements and graduate with my class.

During my early childhood I had the opportunity in my neighborhood to play, not only to play but to be able to speak about what I was learning. The first friend I recall was Jimmy McGuire who lived across the street from us. He was the son of an Irishman and a German lady. It was his fathers' second marriage and he and his sister who was married and who lived in Los Angeles, we had the opportunity to play together every day and I had the opportunity to practice the English I was learning in school. He attended a Catholic school while I attended a public school. Every afternoon we would play together and weekends. He was a great influence in the learning process in using English in play activities. We remained friends through all of elementary school and lost contact after I went to junior high school and played with older boys in the outside neighborhood. It was a great learning process because I was able to use what I was learning in school with my friends. Jimmy was a great influence in my life and we remained friends until he went on to high school.

One of my next door neighbors was Jimmy Torescano. Jimmy was much older than I but somehow we became friends. I knew Jimmy for most of my life in San Diego and we remained friends throughout his first and second marriage. He was living close to us on Beardsly Street close to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. My next door neighbor when we were living near Our Lady of Guadalupe Church was David Reyes. David was about a year older than I but David and I became good friends and we played every afternoon together. That's the extent of my close friendships. I had a lot of other friends who I had who were neighbors.

CRISTY RODRIGUEZ (his daughter): When you were in elementary school and junior high school, you and uncle Charlie, were you and uncle Charlie the only ones who finished high school?

AR: Yeah, my sister Katie went through business school. She was three years older than I so when I went to high school she went to a private school and learned business education. And that's when she became the business agent for the county workers union. She was very active politically. She was very aggressive. Both your mother and I worked with her in her office almost all our early marriage.

C.R.: What about uncle Andy and (the other brothers and sisters)? Did they go to high school?

AR: Uncle Andy, my brother went to Snyder, a continuation school. He went there in the morning and in the afternoon he would go caddy golf. Everybody in the family always worked and contributed to the family. Your aunt Katie and I sold tamales door to door. Everybody in the family worked. That's the way it was.

RG: You also sold ice right?

AR: I also sold ice. That came about because I got a wagon. I found that there were chips of ice that were broken down at the ice plant down on Imperial street and I would go there in the morning and whatever was there I would put in my wagon and going door to door beating the iceman by selling cheaper ice. And it worked until I got caught. The iceman didn't want the competition so I got busted. I was told that I couldn't do that anymore. And the ice company was made aware of it and they placed their broken ice in a place where I couldn't get to it.

RG: this was in Barrio Logan?

AR: Barrio Logan. The ice plant was on K street and we were living on Kearny about three houses from the church.

RG: Your sister, did you or she ever meet or know Luisa Moreno (a labor activist in San Diego in 1930s)?

AR: I knew a Luisa Moreno. My sister was the business agent for the cannery workers union. But she got into some political squabbles and she left the union business and went to be a child care center director and she did that for another 20 years till she died.

RG: Also in your book you mention that your dad was repatriated back to Mexico.

AR: One day my father was looking for work, standing in line to get interviewed for an appointment and the immigration officer just came by and picked up people. You were unemployed and they didn't care whether you had immigration papers or not. He was deported. My dad had papers. So he went back to Gomez Palacios and went to work for the street car company where he had been working before. And so four or five years later when they were convinced that he would not be dependent on the government we got him reimmigrated and he came to live with us.

RG; Didn't you go back to Gomez Palacios?

AR: Yeah, After high school my dad thought we ought to go live in Mexico. We got there and found out that they were full and didn't need anybody else. They wanted graduate from their schools, not from the United States. I don't know if we could have fulfilled the requirements of there or not but we'll never

know because it never happened. We were there about four months and then we re-immigrated to the United States.

RG: Was anybody else repatriated?

AR: No, the only one was my brother, because he voluntarily went back. When they found out that he was not guilty, they found him a job, the manager of a banana plantation in the state of Oaxaca. So he went back and took his whole family with him and about ten years later he came back. He came back and became a book keeper for Agua Caliente race track. But he didn't last there very long, because he was a business man and he established a small business office in Tijuana and he had enough clients that he could fulfill his family requirements. So he left the race track and did just local business., and did that till he died.

RG: So growing up in Barrio Logan you went to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. Can you describe what it was like there, in terms of the priest, youth organizations and so forth?

AR: When we moved in there I became an altar boy and I became very involved with the church activities for about four years until I was old enough to go to junior high. In junior high altar boys weren't part of that scene. The other boys would make fun of you. So I stopped being an altar boy. But I was very involved with the church and with the local priest. But things changed. I began to look at girls.

RG: Another important institution was Neighborhood House. Did you hang out there? What was that like?

AR: The Neighborhood House was kind of a fun place. At the beginning I became very involved with the sport activities, wrestling, and there is where I learned to dance, and that changed my whole life. I became so involved with sports and girls that my whole life changed. Maturity came about and you became involved in looking at the opposite sex. So that became a part of my activity and I became very involved with the Neighborhood House. I learned to dance and learned to do a lot of things there.

RG: So the Neighborhood House was a place where a lot of young people went . Clubs and so forth?

AR: And that's where I first began to get really involved in wrestling. They had a coach, Frank Tweedy who loved sports and he taught us tumbling which led to wrestling and by then I was already in high school and I was going out for wrestling so the two met because it was my activity at school and after school. Frank Crosby (the wrestling coach at San Diego High) became a very good friend. In fact, when I was living in Virginia he came to visit me two or three times just to maintain our relationship. He was very influential in my life.

RG: Another club you were involved with was Club Amigable?

AR: When I was in high school everybody seemed belong to something except the Hispanics, they didn't belong to anything. The Black people had their clubs, the social people had their clubs, the Hispanics had nothing. I think it was about my junior year, I looked around and said, "Why don't we have a social club?" So I got to talk to a few people and before long we started a social organization. Somebody suggested the name Friendly Club, so we translated it "Amigable," mistake, because when they

introduced us in the bulletin it was called "The Gobble Gobble Club." It was kind of a joke with us. But we had a large attendance and many activities. I think we overdid it. Dances and whatnot.

RG: Were you the president?

AR: I wasn't at the beginning but was later on. I helped to organize it. I was the instigator. And after it was all over, I thought it was a sorry thing, because the Hispanics had nowhere to go. But in my senior year I was involved in lots of activities. I couldn't do both so it kind of ran down.

RG: Were you involved in the theater?

AR: Yes and no. It started in junior high Sue Ernest was the drama teacher at Memorial at that time and she later became very active at San Diego State. While she was at Memorial she organized what they called "The Pass and Review" and each year there was a performance done at the school and throughout the community. She was the one who organized it and developed the performance for us and I was always involved with it.

RG: What kind of performance was it?

AR: It was singing and dancing and a little acting. I was involved with a little bit of the acting department. I did an Indian dance for them, or something like that.

RG: So after high school, World War II had started. How did you come to enlist in the army?

AR: I had a choice of enlisting as a Mexican citizen in their army but I wasn't going to do that. I knew what the army was like in Mexico. I applied to enlist in the U.S. army as a soldier and a citizen. I made both applications at the same time. They acted on my enlistment as a soldier but never did anything about my application for citizenship. It wasn't until I had been in the army and gone through basic training in California around Sacramento and then to Baltimore, Fort Meade near Washington D.C. One of the things they did after I went through some tests was enroll me into the learning and decoding of messages, they had to teach me the decoding process. Well the decoding process was limited to U.S. citizens so one day during my early classes the company commander came in and said, "You don't belong here." And I said, "Well sir, I can't disobey you but you ordered me here." He went back and checked and I was right. He came back and said, "You know, the reason I raised these questions is that you are not a U.S. citizen." I said, "Yes sir, you're right but if you saw my application you'll see I also applied to be a U.S. citizen and nobody has acted on it." He said, "Wait here. Go get into your uniform and then wait here." So I got into my uniform and pretty soon he drives up in his jeep and drives me into Baltimore and ten minutes after I was there, I became a U.S. citizen.

RG: You didn't have to take any tests or anything?

AR: No, I had already gone through the Americanization process in high school and I listed that in my application.

RG: Americanization classes, what were those like?

AR: In high school they taught you about the history of the United States.

RG: These were classes only for Mexican kids?

AR: It was the process they go through Americanization for adults. That's what they told us and I suspect that was true, if I recall what the materials were. But it was something about United States, what the laws were, what the regulations were, what the intent of the government was.

RG: Was it one hour a day or a whole day?

AR: It was a series of lectures and readings that you went through and it usually was done after school in a special program for kids who wanted to become U.S. citizens.

RG: So you were in the Army and you got sent to Brazil?

AR: That was weird. At the early beginning of the war there were many American ships with planes who were sailing across to Europe and a number of them got sunk and not only did they lost the ship but they lost the planes. So somebody decided a better way to do it was to fly the planes from Florida to Cuba to airports on the way to Brazil, across the 69 about 300 miles from Brazil, land it there and then fly across to north Africa which was another two hundred miles. It wasn't a dumb move it was a right move. What they did was set up a signal corps program in Recife, Brazil that was as close to Ascencion Island as they could get. And they flew the planes from Florida to Cuba, down the coast and then across to Africa.

CR: Did they select you to go to Brazil? Why?

AR: I have no idea. It was the whole company.

CR: I thought you said they sent you because you spoke Spanish.

AR: That's one of the benefits, if you wanted somebody who could integrate into Brazil. If I had to guess, I would guess that one of the reasons I was sent was because I was Spanish speaking.

RG: But you had to learn to speak Portuguese.

AR: (says a phrase in Portuguese)

RG: You learned that while you were there?

AR: Yah I learned it. You know how I learned it? Every place we stopped I asked to help the workers. And my CO asked why? And I said, "I want to learn how they speak." Because it is very similar to Spanish. So he assigned me to work with the long shore men all the way down. We stopped at three different places. I had three chances to practice the little bit I could learn.

RG: So while you were in Brazil, you found out that you had asthma?

AR: Yah, I was in the hospital. I went into the hospital with high fever and they thought that I had malaria. Well after a long period of time they found out that it wasn't malaria. They found that I was an asthmatic. But that didn't seem to bother them very much until I kept going back to the hospital because of asthma attacks. So they did a thorough study and found out that I was an asthmatic and that I had an allergy that caused that and that it was very prevalent in Brazil.

RG: So they sent you back to the states?

AR: Yah, I went to work in the message centers in Virginia and in Florida. Florida was not a good place for me. Virginia was OK.

RG: So you found out you could control your asthma by exercise and diet?

AR: Yah, I could control it pretty well. But they didn't discharge me until about a year and half later, just towards the end of the war, things were calming down. So they began to look around to see who they could let go. They never told me, but my assumption was that they were trying to eliminate as many as they could that they would not be needed in the restructuring of Europe and Asia. The war was about over and they knew it, much better and sooner than we did.

RG: So after you got out of the service that's when you met your future wife Beatrice?

AR: Yah

RG: I think we have covered things since then in other interviews. But tell me how has your life been since you retired?

AR: Yah, some of the things that concern me is that I left a job unfinished here in California, in Bakersfield. In Bakersfield we had developed a program, and the reason we were in Bakersfield was because of the stability of the population, although the families worked in the farms in the summer, they were always back in the fall and stayed the whole year. Whereas when we were in special programs in San Francisco and New York the mobility of the population was so great that we couldn't get data to validate what we were doing. But in Bakersfield we could and we got good programs in involving the parents in the education of kids, not just Hispanic kids, but kids. And the community involvement in that was so prevalent and so successful that I felt we had something going. And then Mr. Hearst does the unruly thing and dies.

RG: So you're talking about working with the Hearst corporation, William Randolph?

AR: He and I became very close friends, the point where he would visit us in San Diego every year and spend a week or so with us. He really became very involved. So when he passed away, I said, "That's enough of it."

CR: Maybe it started at the end of Virginia. Mr. Hearst and my dad initiated some pilot projects in several cities of the United States providing low income schools with funding for hardware and software, teacher training, to get a program going to improve education in those schools. So they did that for many years, the two of them.

AR: We became very close and when he passed away I said, "Ya se acabo" It wasn't the money. The money was still there.

RG: So we have already talked about this, but looking back, what kind of lesson would you like to impart to the future generations?

AR: My advice to the people is make yourself happy by choosing how to make other people happy and making them successful when, in effect, their success is your success. Their pleasure is your pleasure. And if you can understand that and live with that, life will be good. You will be good for life.