A Turning Point

A new project is collecting oral histories from Latinos shaped by World War II

BYLINE: Suzanne Gamboa
DATE: May 22, 2000
PUBLICATION: Austin American-Statesman
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1

Hector Galn remembers his father's tales of going to war in the 1940s to eat, fight and die with soldiers of different races, only to return to a home front that wanted him to take his place in a segregated society.

``When he came back, they wanted to go back to business as usual, and that wasn't going to happen,'' said Galn, who has created several documentaries capturing the history and culture of Latinos.

The United States changed in many ways because of its involvement in World War II. During the war, women went to work in factories, and some were among the troops. Rural residents poured into cities. Returning veterans found that the GI Bill opened college doors. And the seeds of the civil rights movement were planted.

``World War II was a real defining moment for the United States, period,'' said Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, director of the U.S. Latinos and Latinas & World War II project, which is collecting oral histories of Latino veterans. ``For Hispanics, it was an even bigger turning point.''

The fastest-growing minority population in the country, Hispanics are expected to account for one of every four Americans by 2050. Keeping pace with that boom are efforts to stake a claim not only to the nation's future, but to its past. But the recollections of the people who experienced the awakening age that followed World War II -- and there were many -- are fading.

Rivas-Rodriguez, a University of Texas assistant professor of journalism, is collecting the veterans' oral histories and bringing together those who have studied Latinos and World War II for a meeting Friday and Saturday.

``This conference is a first step in jogging the national memory,'' said David Montejano, director of the UT Center for Mexican American Studies and an associate professor of history.

``World War II, remember, was the war against Aryan supremacy. That whole ideology of equality was extremely important in spite of the apparent contradictions with this country at the time,'' said Montejano, whose book ``Anglos and Mexicans and the Making of Texas'' includes accounts of Latinos in World War II. "We have a civil rights movement we don't know much about that occurs in the late '40s. It was a very important period in this country, and it laid the groundwork of the later movement in the '60s."
Rivas-Rodriguez’s father, a mason before the war, was stationed at Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands and saw Japanese fighters strafe the island, a fact she learned only after she began her project. When he returned home, her father used his veterans' benefits to attend barber college and was outspoken about racism.

"These men, and it was mostly men, went to law school and started practicing law, and they realized how much needed to be changed," Rivas-Rodriguez said. Hispanic civil rights groups such as the American GI Forum, born in Corpus Christi, and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund sprang up.

Virgilio Roel went from Laredo into the service, then to law school, a private practice and numerous federal positions that had never been held by a Mexican American.

"World War II was the Golden Age for Hispanics," said Roel, 77, now retired in Austin. From Laredo alone, he said, about 50 people went to the University of Texas on the GI Bill, which granted various benefits to veterans, including college tuition breaks. "That created a great cadre of Mexican American professionals throughout the country," Roel said.

Rivas-Rodriguez’s hope for the project is not only to document a generation but to move the contributions of Latinos and the effect of the war on them beyond the realm of ethnic studies.

With the help of volunteers and students in her journalism classes, the stories of Latino veterans are being recorded on video and audio tape. Many of the stories are from the volunteers' grandfathers, fathers or other relatives. Volunteers in several cities are being trained to use some of the same techniques used by the Shoah Foundation, which interviewed Holocaust survivors.

With each tale of combat come accounts of what daily life was like for Latinos, mostly Mexican Americans, at the time. Many were destined for or working at low-wage jobs. Some had been lucky enough to find work through the Civilian Conservation Corps, a Depression-era project begun by President Franklin Roosevelt. Others lived in communities that were wholly Hispanic and had no contact with Anglos. Many believed education was key to escaping poverty.

Rivas-Rodriguez said that as the stories are being retold, an awakening is again occurring. Many of the volunteers were not aware of their parents' or grandparents' struggles or their stamina, she said.

"If young Latinos knew what their grandparents had done and gone through, I think it would have a powerful effect," she said. "They would learn that they come from an honorable, dignified, hard-working people. You can't really tell the history of the United States without telling these people's stories."

As the interviews have been conducted, volunteers also have been compiling memorabilia -- newspaper clippings, letters, diaries and other artifacts -- which, along with the oral interviews, Rivas-Rodriguez and others hope, will become part of an archive at UT libraries.

One of the long-term goals of the project is to collect enough stories -- thousands are needed, and so far only 40 people have been interviewed -- to produce a documentary made by Galn. Many of Galn's documentaries are aired by PBS.

"For years I've been wanting to do a (documentary) on Latinos and Latinas in World War II," he said.
His father, a 77-year-old San Angelo resident, is a World War II veteran who fought in the Philippines, drafted from the Civilian Conservation Corps. Before the war, his father was "breaking rocks."

Afterward, he worked in a civil service job fueling aircraft, a job that paid far better wages, Galn said.

For Latinas, the war was equally life-altering. As did Anglo women, those who stayed home went to work in defense factories. But for Latinas, mostly Mexican Americans, the shift to work was far more dramatic, said Naomi Quionez, an assistant professor of Chicano studies at California State University-Fullerton.

"Mexican American women were coming from a more poverty-stricken condition. They had little access to higher-wage jobs. Comparing that to Anglo women, that was a first in regard to the critical mass of Mexican American women who were there," Quionez said.

"Also, we had more of a cultural stigma. According to Mexican American cultural values, women should not be working out of the home," she added.

Quionez's father served in World War II, and her mother was a "Rosita the Riveter," she said. The GI Bill allowed her father to buy a home for the family. But even then, he could not buy a home in Los Angeles, only on the city's outskirts.

Despite the hardships and discrimination, the stories collected through the project reflect a spirit of patriotism and pride in having served or having made a contribution to the country while it was at war.

"It was a chance to claim first-class citizenship," Montejano said. "And what better way to do that than fighting a war?"

You may contact Suzanne Gamboa at sgamboa@statesman.com or 445-3689.

(FROM BOX)

Elisa Rodrigues

Long before World War II, Elisa Rodriguez stood up to racism.

When her Spanish teacher in Waco didn't want to give her a medal for earning the highest grades in the class, giving it to an Anglo girl instead, Rodriguez complained to the principal, who persuaded the teacher to relent.

But as much as she fought for equality, Rodriguez, 78, said that had it not been for the war, she would have ended up working in a laundry or at a $7-a-week department sales job. Before the war, Elisa took night classes in stenography, typing and other secretarial skills, hoping some day to be a well-paid secretary. Her first job was at Blackland Army Airfield in Waco in 1943.

"They were good jobs, and I figured that was a way you could advance," said Rodriguez, now living in Austin. "It gave me an opportunity to get a decent job, and at least I'm going to get an annuity."

She almost didn't get there. Before Blackland, she tried to get a secretarial job at Bluebonnet Ordnance, a bomb-making plant in the nearby town of McGregor. She said she was told the job wasn't open and was offered a job on the factory line, where other Mexican American women were working. She turned it down.

Today, Rodriguez is retired after spending 34 years in civil service jobs with the military. She didn't get all the advancement she had hoped for in her career -- discrimination lingered long after the war, she said.
Drafted by the Army in 1942, Virgilio Roel could have excused himself. He qualified for an exemption because he was working in a Laredo customs brokerage house that was importing weaponry from Mexico for the United States. He chose not to take the exemption.

He was quickly recognized for his Spanish-speaking ability and intelligence and sent to Ohio State University for special training. He directed a Women's Air Corps unit and then -- after stuffing himself with bananas and milk to meet the Army's weight requirement -- he became a paratrooper.

He used his GI Bill benefits to attend the University of Texas and graduated magna cum laude, the only one among 14 siblings to graduate from college. He hitchhiked to Washington, D.C., to get his law degree at Georgetown University.

Roel's life is punctuated with attempts to fight racism. In college, he and other Laredo natives at UT organized against a state policy that allowed children to be segregated in school on the basis of their language. He ran his own law firm and provided pro bono legal services to Mexican Americans in the Rio Grande Valley.

He also served as a legal adviser in the National Guard Bureau, investigated the Border Patrol for a U.S. Senate committee and served as an associate justice of American Samoa. He held positions in the U.S. Postal Service and the Housing and Urban Development Department and worked on the Civil Service Commission, often helping to recruit more blacks and Hispanics into the agencies and fighting rules that discriminated against them.

Roel, 77, also organized voters, worked on various political campaigns, including those of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, and worked in the Democratic Party to get Reynaldo Garza appointed the first Hispanic U.S. district judge.

``It was a matter of doing the right thing, of trying to make a real democracy for our people because, after all, the purpose we went to fight the war was democracy," said Roel, who now lives in Austin.

Mike Aguirre

The San Antonio neighborhood where Mike Aguirre grew up was filled with Anglo families. He mixed with Anglo children at school, dated Anglo girls and was one of the few Mexican Americans at Brackenridge High, where he graduated, he said.

But after graduation, he found there were no jobs to be had -- at least not for `Mexicans," said Aguirre, now a San Marcos resident. Needing work, Aguirre volunteered for the National Guard. When the United States entered World War II, Aguirre volunteered for the Army, becoming a field photographer who took ground and aerial photos before and after U.S. bombing raids and who installed and maintained aircraft photo equipment.

In the military, Aguirre said, he found little discrimination. ``I was the only Spanish-speaking guy," he said. ``But we had a lot of Jewish guys, Italian guys and Irish guys, so there was no discrimination. Everybody got along."

Aguirre's military career -- which included stints in the Merchant Marines and the Air Force -- ended in 1963. Then the racism returned.

Aguirre wanted to be a postal carrier and was told there were no jobs, but when he found out that some new postal carriers were hired after him and that they were Anglo, he complained to a U.S. senator. He was hired but found that racism continued.

``When I retired (from the military), that's when I was hit with discrimination more than anything else," he said. ``I came through San Marcos here once in my uniform, and I wasn't allowed in the restaurant."
U.S. Latinos and Latinas & World War II

A project is under way at the University of Texas to document the roles of Latinos and Latinas in World War II and how the war changed them. The public can participate and learn more by:

* Attending a two-day conference dedicated to the subject, set for Friday and Saturday at the University of Texas Alumni Center, 2110 San Jacinto Blvd. The cost is $75. The registration fee includes two continental breakfasts, two luncheons and one reception.
* Becoming an interviewer. Project organizers hold training sessions around the state or provide training videos to teach volunteers oral history interviewing techniques. Volunteers who speak English or Spanish are sought.
* Sharing your story. The project needs people who are interested in being interviewed or know someone who should be interviewed.
* Helping transcribe interviews or digitize photos. The project does not have a full-time staff and relies on volunteers for many of the tasks needed to document the oral histories and collect historical photos.
* Donating money or equipment. The project is trying to get a grant but until then is relying on donations. For now, donations are covering the costs of audio and videotapes, training sessions and other materials. Eventually, organizers hope the project has a full-time staff.

For more information, contact Denise Rocha at 471-1924 or go to www.utexas.edu/projects/latinoarchives/.

Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, an assistant professor at UT, is the organizer of a conference this week on Latinos and World War II. //Mike Aguirre, above, of San Marcos displays some of the honors he received from his days as an Army field photographer. At top is a photo of him as a young sergeant serving in India in 1943-44. Aguirre and other Latinos share their stories of World War II as part of a University of Texas project commemorating their role in the nation's history.

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