

Publication: El Paso Times **Date:** 04/22/2006

War altered future for Latinos

By Ramon Bracamontes
El Paso Times

“Nobody had ever called me an American before that time. I’d been called a lot of things ... that was the first time in my life that I had been called an American,”

— Armando Flores

World War II veteran from Mission, Texas

The pride that World War II veteran Armando Flores felt when his commander told him that American soldiers don’t stand with their hands in their pockets epitomizes what that war did for Hispanics in the United States.

It is also the reason Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, has devoted time and energy into the seven-year U.S. Latino & **Latina** WWII **Oral History** Project.

The project, through testimonials, documents the contributions of Hispanics to the war and the country.

“Of all the people that we can talk to right now, this generation saw more change than anyone else,” Rivas-Rodriguez said of the WWII generation. “We need to make sure their stories are told. If you read WWII and Great Depression history, you probably will not find much about Latinos.”

Rivas-Rodriguez spent Friday in El Paso talking about the project, which began in 1999. A photo display accompanying her talk featured Flores’ testimonial of when he was called an “American” by his commander.

Even though various military historical sources suggest between 250,000 and 500,000 Hispanics served in the armed forces during WWII, many of their stories never have been documented. More important, WWII was a major turning point for Hispanics in the United States, Rivas-Rodriguez said.

“When they came back from the war, they had a (perspective) that they didn’t have before,” she said. “They came back and said, ‘This isn’t right,’ and they started changing things.”

For example, before WWII El Paso had almost no Hispanic police officers or firefighters because they were disqualified by those who selected people for the jobs.

When El Pasoan Albert Armendariz Sr. returned from the war and got his law degree, he was appointed to the city’s civil service commission and began changing the rules so Hispanics could be firefighters and policemen, Rivas-Rodriguez said.

“The contributions made by Latinos in this era are everywhere,” she said.

Among those who provided a testimonial for the project was El Paso veteran Manny Rivas, who enlisted in 1942 along with his twin brother, Salvador. They served in the same platoon.

“When we weren’t in combat, it was great. We were always together,” Rivas, 81, said. “But when we were in combat, it was a nightmare. I was always checking body bags to make sure he wasn’t dead.”

They both returned to El Paso in 1946 and became successful businessmen, Rivas said.

The GI Bill, officially known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, was designed to help WWII veterans after their service. The bill, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944, provided veterans with money to get an education, to buy a home or start a business.

“This bill enabled the growth of the middle class because veterans took advantage of the GI Bill to open a business and buy a home,” said University of Texas at Austin anthropology Professor Maria Menchaca.

Seven years after WWII, about 8 million veterans had received educational benefits from the bill. Of that number, about 2.3 million went to colleges and universities.

Alpine native Pete A. Gallego is a graduate of Sul Ross State University and a WWII veteran. He drove to El Paso on Friday to hear Rivas-

Rodriguez speak. His mug shot is on the cover of the book “A Legacy Greater Than Words,” which commemorates the Latino project.

“This project is great,” said Gallego, who is the father of state Rep. Pete Gallego, D-Alpine. “It brings old memories back. I hope (today’s generation) understands what we did.”

Rivas-Rodriguez said the project has grown beyond her expectations. An educational component is being prepared for the school districts, and Arizona State University has written and produced a play about WWII and Latinos.

The play, “Voice of Valor,” has been performed in Arizona and Austin. Rivas-Rodriguez is trying to find a sponsor willing to help bring the play to El Paso.

“The oral histories are good,” she said, “but when you see what these people did in the play, it is magical.”

Learn more

•Latinas and Latinos in WWII Web site: [www.utexas.](http://www.utexas.edu/projects/latinoarchives)

[edu/projects/](http://www.utexas.edu/projects/latinoarchives)

[latinoarchives](http://www.utexas.edu/projects/latinoarchives)

Ramon Bracamontes may be reached at rbracamontes@elpasotimes.com;

546-6142.

Photo Caption: UT-Austin journalism Professor Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez talked Friday at the El Paso Museum of Art about the contributions Hispanics made during World War II and after.
