

# **Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978**

## **Fresno Historical Society**

### **Rebecca Ruiz**

Rebecca Ruiz, nee Avila, was interviewed on April 6, 1977 in Fresno, California. Ruiz was born in Fresno on January 8, 1926. Ruiz talks about her how when her father lived in Texas, he would take up several jobs, including being a taxi driver. Ruiz mentions how even when her father moved to California, he still experienced discrimination just as he had in Texas. Ruiz says that most Mexicans in Fresno worked on ranches, railroads, or in construction labor. Ruiz explains how she is Presbyterian, but at the time there was not a Spanish-speaking Presbyterian church so her family went to a Mexican Baptist church instead. She also mentions several Mexican men and women who were church leaders in Fresno. Ruiz explains how her dad was a member of many organizations and clubs, as well as how he helped a youth group.

Ruiz went to Edison High School and was a majorette in the band all throughout high school. She also has stories about going to school while her father was on the board of trustees at Edison. Ruiz's father became a citizen on May 9, 1933. However, her mother passed away before she could finish taking her citizenship class. Ruiz discusses living through the Great Depression, and how her father worked hard to make sure there was always food on the table. Ruiz talks about Dr. Palamonque, the only Mexican doctor in Fresno at the time she was young.

Ruiz discusses World War II and says that the Mexican people who did not go to war ended up getting better paid jobs. Ruiz mentions a Mexican woman who would teach Spanish and English to adults in night school. Ruiz talks about how she believes the term "Chicano" is a degrading word to Mexicans. Ruiz talks about the success of her family and how they have pushed past Mexican stereotypes.

Interviewer: Marie Cassano

Transcript: 12 pages

Audio: Unavailable

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Interview with REBECCA (AVILA) RUIZ

Today, April 6, 1977, I, Marie Cassano, a student at CSUF, enrolled in an Ethnic Studies class in Oral History will tape an interview with Mrs. Rebecca (Avila) Ruiz, a female, Mexican-American woman in her home.

CASSANO: Okay, Becky, where were you born?

RUIZ: I was born here in Fresno, California.

CASSANO: What year and month?

RUIZ: January the 8th, 1926.

CASSANO: Have you always lived in Fresno?

RUIZ: I was born and raised here.

CASSANO: So your longest place of residence would be Fresno, California.

RUIZ: Yes, I've always lived in Fresno. I've never had any desire to live any other place. I guess I am one of those lucky people whose husband went along with my wishes. You know, my husband was born in Mexico City but was raised in Brawley. We met during the Second World War. He happened to be stationed here in Fresno at Hammer Field.

CASSANO: Okay, what were your parents' names?

RUIZ: My father's name was MOSES CALDERON AVILA and my mother's name was EGLANTINE BARRON DIAZ.

CASSANO: Where were they born?

RUIZ: They were born in Mexico.

CASSANO: When did they come to the United States?

RUIZ: My father immigrated to the United States on the National Railroad. He arrived at the Port of Eagle Pass, Texas, July 4th, 1887 with his parents. My father was 5½ years old when he immigrated to the United States. My mother and her parents were already living in Texas. I really don't know what year my mother immigrated to the U.S.

CASSANO: Why did he come to the U.S.?

RUIZ: Well, actually his parents were the ones who brought him to the United States.

CASSANO: Your grandparents?

- RUIZ: My grandparents. Same year as my father immigrated, 1887.
- CASSANO: Your parents were married in Texas?
- RUIZ: Yes, my parents were married in Texas.
- CASSANO: What year were your parents married?
- RUIZ: My parents were married August 2, 1901 and they were married in San Marcos, Texas.
- CASSANO: How many children did they have?
- RUIZ: They had two boys and six girls. My sister, Nina just passed away last year. Four of us are left.
- CASSANO: Was your mother very young?
- RUIZ: Yes, my mother was 13 years old and my daddy was 19.
- CASSANO: What type of occupation did your daddy have at that time when they were married?
- RUIZ: My dad always had two jobs. He worked in the Post Office, farm work, carpenter work and jitney service. He even taught school for three months. What type of occupation he had at the time they were married, it could have been anyone of these jobs.
- CASSANO: A "jitney service"? What do they mean by the terminology "jitney service"?
- RUIZ: Years ago, taxi cabs were called "jitneys".
- CASSANO: Did he use his own car, or did he work for a company?
- RUIZ: He used his own car. At night he would pick the soldiers up from town and he would take them to Kelly Field in San Antonio.
- CASSANO: How old was your dad then?
- RUIZ: I don't know how old he was then but I would say in his early twenties.
- CASSANO: Was you Dad ever in the service?
- RUIZ: No, he was never in the service. Why? I really don't know. Possibly because he was not an American citizen.
- CASSANO: Did he talk about any Mexican movement in Mexico at that time, that made the family move to Texas? Wars, or any type of movement?
- RUIZ: No, Dad was too young when he lived in Mexico to talk about such things.

- CASSANO: When did you come to California.
- RUIZ: My grandfather was the first to arrive and he bought a small ranch in Firebaugh. When he started to do good in his ranching, he sent for my parents and his children. In fact, my grandfather sent them the money to come to California to live with them.
- CASSANO: What kind of ranch did you have in Firebaugh?
- RUIZ: My grandfather had a walnut ranch. It was a small ranch, and several years later he bought another ranch which was larger and he moved to Atwater. My parents followed.
- CASSANO: What kind of ranch was in Atwater?
- RUIZ: Again it was a walnut ranch.
- CASSANO: When did he move to Fresno?
- RUIZ: My dad wanted to live in a larger city. He felt the opportunities would be better here not only employment but better education for his children.
- CASSANO: Did your Dad go to school?
- RUIZ: Yes, he went to school in San Antonio. I remember him talking about his professors. That is where he learned the English language.
- CASSANO: Did he have anglo teachers?
- RUIZ: That I don't know.
- CASSANO: Did he speak Mexican at all in school.
- RUIZ: It is not called Mexican. The language is Spanish.
- CASSANO: Did he speak Spanish in school:
- RUIZ: I imagine he spoke Spanish in school until he learned the English language.
- CASSANO: Was there any discrimination?
- RUIZ: In Texas, yes. I remember him talking about Mexican people having to step off the sidewalk and let an Anglo go by, that was discrimination.
- CASSANO: Did he have any discrimination here in California?
- RUIZ: Yes, at the Santa Fe Railroad where he worked. I would say it was in the 1930s.
- CASSANO: In Firebaugh, was there a Mexican community, at the time your parents moved there?

- RUIZ: I really don't know.
- CASSANO: How about when you moved back to Fresno?
- RUIZ: No, we never lived in a Mexican community. At that time, I really can't say there was a community for Mexican people. You just lived wherever we wanted to. My parents lived in a block where there was actually only two other Mexican families.
- CASSANO: What type of work did most of the Mexican people do here in Fresno, at that time?
- RUIZ: Well the majority of them worked on ranches, railroads and construction labor.
- CASSANO: What did your Dad do?
- RUIZ: My dad started working for the Santa Fe Railroad in 1924, and retired 24½ years later.
- CASSANO: Did you attend church or any other organizations in Fresno?
- RUIZ: We are Presbyterians, and actually there wasn't a Spanish-speaking Presbyterian Church here in Fresno. So, we attended the Mexican Baptist Church. Mother use to like to go there because they spoke Spanish.
- CASSANO: Did your mother speak Spanish and English?
- RUIZ: My mother spoke Spanish and just a little English.
- CASSANO: She didn't learn English as well as you Dad did?
- RUIZ: No, the little English she knew, she learned here in California.
- CASSANO: Was your Dad in charge of anything at the Church?
- RUIZ: Yes, even though we were not Baptist, Dad was involved in several committees.
- CASSANO: Was there any particular Mexican men or women that were leaders in Fresno?
- RUIZ: Well yes, actually the minister of the Mexican Baptist Church, who was Dr. DeRose, he was a very good friend of my Dad and then the Attorney, Glen DeVore, who was attending the same church because he was trying to learn the Spanish language and that is where my Dad met him and they became very close friends. Of course, there was Mr. Acosta, Mrs. Adolaida Loera and my dad, Mr. Moses C. Avila.

- CASSANO: What was their positions in Fresno?
- RUIZ: Mr. Acosta helped Mexican people who could not speak English get their dirver's licenses. Mrs. Adolaida Loera taught Spanish in night school. My dad was an interpreter in court for the Mexican people.
- CASSANO: Now, your Dad worked as an interpreter part-time?
- RUIZ: Yes, whenever a Mexican person who could not speak the English language and had to go to court, Dad would interpret for them. Because of very little security and pay in this job, at that time, Dad quit interpreting and continued working for the railroad.
- CASSANO: Whereabouts was your Dad's job located with the Railroad?
- RUIZ: The Santa Fe was located in Calwa.
- CASSANO: How would he travel?
- RUIZ: Dad traveled to and from work with his own car.
- CASSANO: What type of work did your dad do for the railroad?
- RUIZ: Dad was a laborer at first, then later became an oiler.
- CASSANO: Did he belong to a Union?
- RUIZ: I really don't know, I would say no.
- CASSANO: Did your Dad belong to any organizations in Fresno, either Mexican or Anglo?
- RUIZ: Yes, Dad was always willing to help the Mexican people so he joined the "Sociudad Morelos Mutualista, Espano Americanos, Red Cross and International Institute.
- CASSANO: Did he hold an office at any one of these clubs?
- RUIZ: Yes, I know he was President several times for the Sociudad Morelos Mutualista. He was involved with this organization for over ten years.
- CASSANO: I understand he helped the Youth Authorities with the youth group. Can you tell me more about that?
- RUIZ: Yes, he did. This camp consisted of youths in their teens who had been involved with the law. The camp was located in Coarsegold and was like a road camp or juvenile hall. These youths stayed in this camp for a certain length of time. Dad would arrange entertainment programs for the camp. The young people enjoyed this.

CASSANO: I see you have several letters here thanking your father for services rendered with these young youths. (see attachment)

RUIZ: Yes, this is true. Dad really enjoyed working with these young teenagers.

CASSANO: Can you tell me about the activities that you participated in during your high school years?

RUIZ: I went to Edison High School and participated in many school activities. I was a majorette for three years. In my senior year, I became head majorette. During these years, I worked closely with the band department. While in my senior year, the Fresno Bee photographed all the head majorettes from the local high schools. These pictures were put in the newspaper and later this particular newspaper was sent overseas to the men at war.

CASSANO: Was your Dad affiliated with any school activities?

RUIZ: Yes, he was on the school board, as a trustee, at the time I was going to Edison School. In fact, one incident that I remember right now was that we had a jitter-bug contest at Edison. We use to have these noon dances, not the night dances like they have now. I remember it would cost a nickel to get into the gym. I decided to participate in the contest. Not that I was such a good dancer, but it just so happened we won, my partner and I came in first place. Well being that we went to church, Dad kind of frowned about the dances, so I didn't tell him about it. A week later when he had a school board meeting, Mr. Aspinal, the principal, was a very good friend of my father. He came up to my father and started to congratulate him. My father was very confused and had no knowledge of what he was talking about. Mr. Aspinal asked my father if he knew that I had won first prize in a jitter-bug contest. Dad was very surprised and laughed about it and didn't get mad.

CASSANO: Did your father ever become an American citizen?

RUIZ: Oh yes, he became an American citizen here in Fresno and it was on May 9th, 1933.

CASSANO; I bet that was a happy day?

RUIZ: Yes it was. Even though I was very young, I can remember my parents and my sisters talking about it. My father was quite proud because it meant security in his job.

CASSANO: Did your mother become an American citizen too?

RUIZ: No she didn't. My mother was taking a class on becoming an American citizen, but during this time she became quite ill and had to quit; less than a year later, she passed away.

- CASSANO: Do you recall anything about the KKK in Fresno.
- RUIZ: No, I don't recall anything like that and my father never got involved in anything like that, let alone talk about it.
- CASSANO: I understand you had a brother who died quite young.
- RUIZ: My brother, Raul, died of double pneumonia. At that time my parents lived in San Antonio, Texas. My older sister Obbie said that he died on Armistice Day. She said it was a happy day for every one else except our family. When my brother Raul died, I hadn't even been born yet. So I don't know much about his death only what my parents and sisters have told me.
- CASSANO: How old was he?
- RUIZ: Raul was around a year old when he died.
- CASSANO: Okay, did you Dad tell you anything about the prohibition days?
- RUIZ: Dad never talked about the prohibition days. Dad never drank.
- CASSANO: During the depression, what did your family do for survival?
- RUIZ: My father was a very ambitious person. He worked hard at the job that he had with the Santa Fe Railroad Company. These times were hard but we always had food but most of all, we had each other.
- CASSANO: Were the wages poor?
- RUIZ: Yes, very poor. Dad was proud of the fact he had never had to stand in the bread line, that meant a lot to him. He was a very proud person.
- CASSANO: Did you or your father take an interest in politics?
- RUIZ: No, neither one of us.
- CASSANO: Were you registered voters?
- RUIZ: Oh yes, a very, very strong Democrat. He passed this on to us. I don't remember any other party in our family. In our home, you were a Democrat and that was it.
- CASSANO: Did you feel that most of the Mexican people in Fresno participated in the voting process.
- RUIZ: I can't really say whether they did or didn't. At that time, I really don't think there were very many that were American citizens.



CASSANO: Were there any politicians or professional people who were friends of the family?

RUIZ: Yes. There was Dr. DeRose, who was the minister of the Mexican Baptist Church, and Attorney Glen DeVore, who was the District Attorney at that time and this is the man my father was an interpreter for. I had an uncle who was a Presbyterian Minister.

CASSANO: Here in Fresno?

RUIZ: No, he was a minister in San Antonio, Texas. Also Mayor Leymel was a close friend of the family and was quite fond of the Mexican family.

CASSANO: You have a document here that Mayor Leymel sent out to every child born in Fresno County while he was in office. (see attachment).

RUIZ: Right, it was a certificate for the new citizen. This was issued to my niece. It was just something special he did for the people of Fresno while he was in office.

CASSANO: I notice you have other documents here, and it is from the Burnett Sanitarium. I don't recall a Burnett Sanitarium in Fresno.

RUIZ: The Burnett Sanitarium, at that time, was the only hospital in Fresno. It was located on Fresno Street and is now the Community Hospital.

CASSANO: Who was your family doctor at that time?

RUIZ: Dr. Palamonque. He was a very good friend of ours also. He came from Mexico and he was the only Mexican doctor in Fresno at that time.

CASSANO: Were there any Mexican dentists at that time?

RUIZ: No, not at that time. I don't recall any. Most of the dentists were Japanese and Chinese, and of course many anglos.

CASSANO: Where was Dr. Palamonque located?

RUIZ: His office was in Chinatown on "E" Street. He helped the Mexican people an awful lot. He was very good to the Mexican people.

CASSANO: Okay, Becky, what were the Mexican people's reaction about the attack on Pearl Harbor?

RUIZ: Well, I'll tell you. It saddened all of us. Just to think the U.S. had to go to war. We or I should say my Dad was very thankful he didn't have any sons going over.

- CASSANO: What personal feelings did he have toward the Japanese?
- RUIZ: He felt that they couldn't be trusted. He felt that the U.S. was doing the right thing by putting them in concentration camps.
- CASSANO: Did you patronize any of their stores, during that period.
- RUIZ: No, I don't even remember if their stores were open at that time.
- CASSANO: Did the attack on Pearl Harbor have any special affect on the Mexican people as a whole?
- RUIZ: Actually, times were even better at that time. Those who stayed behind and didn't have to go were the ones who were getting the better paid jobs and making better wages than they had before.
- CASSANO: Did you have any relatives in that war?
- RUIZ: In the second war?
- CASSANO: Yes.
- RUIZ: Yes, we had two cousins that went. We had many friends. My husband was going to go to Germany. In fact, his boat was heading for Germany and the war ended in Germany, so they turned around and brought them back and sent them on to Japan.
- CASSANO: Did you marry your husband during the war?
- RUIZ: Yes, we were already married. I got married on April 18, 1945, and he was already in the service. By the way, that's how my husband became an American citizen. WE got married because we knew he would have to go overseas, and we thought he was going to Germany but he ended up going to Japan.
- CASSANO: What was his rank?
- RUIZ: Private in the Army. We had other friends that were involved in the service. Dick Garcia, he went on, in fact he got his education here in Fresno. At that time, mother use to take care of WElfare children, and when the welfare children became 18 years old, they were on their own. Dicky Garcia finished Edison High School and then started college and this was on his own, then he went into the service and he made this his career. He came out as a Major.
- CASSANO: Did he settle back here in Fresno?

- RUIZ: Yes
- CASSANO: Have you seen him since?
- RUIZ: No, not as often as I would like to. The last I had heard he had gone back to school, CSUF, and he was taking classes in polution. For awhile, he was doing transport piloting for different companies.
- CASSANO: Do you feel Fresno had a better appreciation for the Mexican boys when they came back from the war?
- RUIZ: I really don't know.
- CASSANO: Well having all sisters and no brothers, it would be hard to make a judgement.
- RUIZ: It did not pertain to my family, so I can't honestly answer that.
- CASSANO: Were there any Mexican women leaders in Fresno at that time?
- RUIZ: Yes, Mrs. Loera.
- CASSANO: What did she do?
- RUIZ: She was teaching the Spanish or English to the adults at night Adult School.
- CASSANO: Okay, from you Dad's time to now, would you say the Mexican Ethnic Group, as a whole, have a better lifestyle now than before?
- RUIZ: Yes, I firmly believe that.
- CASSANO: Okay, now they are using the terminology "Chicano", what do you think of this terminology?
- RUIZ: Well, I'll tell you the terminology "Chicano", if the older Mexican people were living now, they would never use that word "Chicano". I, for one, would never identify with the word "Chicano", I don't like it and I would not want to be identified with it. I'm a Mexican and the word "Chicano" for some reason or another, to a Mexican is a degrading word.
- CASSANO: You mentioned that you have no brothers that went into the service or are alive now, do you want to tell me what happened to your other brother.
- RUIZ: Yes, around April, 1924, my parents were living on "G" Street, which was right across from Roeding Company. Around 2 o'clock in the morning, my mother happen to wake up and saw a reflection from her bedroom window. She awoke

quickly and was under the impression the house next door was on fire. Well, it just so happened that it was our house and when she realized this, she awoke my Dad. My Dad told her to take my sister and family out, as they were sleeping downstairs with them and he would go upstairs and tell the rest of the family. (see attached articles from the local newspapers for details).

My father was burned severely and my mother said the first aid the fireman gave him at the scene, saved his life.

CASSANO: Well Becky, we are near the end of the interview, do you have any further comments?

RUIZ: Yes, I would like to comment on my father. He was a very hard working man, always holding down two jobs and worked for 25 years for the Santa Fe Railroad. Upon retirement, he received a lovely document and his pension. He was always helping the Mexican people. On Cinco de May Day, which is the Mexican Independence Day, he would always help with the committees, making arrangements for the parades, banquets and the complete celebration.

My father was a firm believer in education. Even though he had only girls left, he emphasized that education was a first priority. My brother was only 14 years of age when he was burned to death, but he was very studious. He was a very quiet young man. My sister, who was also burned to death in the fire, was enrolled at McKay's Business College and would have graduated that year. My sister, Obbie, was the leader of the family. She graduated from high school in 1931 and at that time there were only two Mexicans that graduated from high school. She held an office of President of the Honorary Club.

CASSANO: Wasn't it unusual at that time for Mexican children to attend school.

RUIZ: Very, very unusual. As Obbie said, there were only two Mexicans that graduated in 1931 from her school.

CASSANO: What did you sister Obbie do after graduating from high school?

RUIZ: She attended 4 C's College.

CASSANO: What position do you hold today?

RUIZ: I'm a nurse for Dr. Wm. M. Duprey.

CASSANO: Do you remember any Mexican families owning their own business?

RUIZ: Yes, there were some in Chinatown. La Cucaracha, Mexico Cafe and the Mexican Bakery, are a few that I can remember.

CASSANO: Did you have a special activity that you did as a little girl that stands out in your mind?

RUIZ: Yes, when we lived on San Benito Street, my sister, Nina and I went to Emerson School. During the summertime, we liked to make lemonade. We would sell it to anyone who walked by. They would buy the lemonade from our lemonade stand in front of our house, and this made us feel very important. I was just a little youngster at that time, but we both enjoyed it very much. I feel that sometimes it is good to look into the past when they bring good memories.

There is one more comment I would like to make. It's too bad that the Historical Society took such a long time in doing something for our Mexican Heritage. I wish they could have interviewed my Dad personally along with many other fine Mexican men, as they had a lot to offer in regard to Mexican History.

CASSANO: Okay, Becky, you have done an excellent job reminiscing through your past experiences and through you dad's experiences. I have certainly enjoyed this interview. Thank you for your patience and time, it was delightful.

"By my signature, I make this transcript available to researchers in the Fresno City andCounty Historical Society Archives."

Rebecca A. Ruiz  
Rebecca (Avila) Ruiz, Interviewee

May 6, 1977  
(Date)

Marie Cassano  
Marie Cassano, Interviewer

May 6, 1977  
(Date)