

Frank R. Torres

Interviewed by Emily Torres
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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Transcribed by Emily Torres

Emily Torres: My name is Emily Torres. I am interviewing Frank R. Torres. Today is September 29th, 2020. I am in Houston, Texas. My grandfather is in Del Rio, Texas. Therefore, this is an interview over the phone. Today we will be talking about his experiences on the Texas railways in Del Rio, Texas.

Emily Torres: Ok Guito, how long did you work on the railroad?

Frank R. Torres: Approximately thirty-eight and a half years.

Emily Torres: Wow. Why did you choose to work on the railroad?

Frank R. Torres: Basically, it wasn't a choice. I was going to college at the time and I came home, and my father was a railroader but at the time he had just been laid off due to furloughing and was no longer in the railroading industry. Told me that they were hiring people on the rial road and If I was interested. So, I came home, and he asked me if I was interested in having a job in the railroad. And if I was, I was to go talk to a guy named Charlie Row. He said he is a local chairman for the brakeman at the time and he could give you some advice and he could recommend you have an interview in San Antonio. So, I went and talked to him, I had about a semester left in college. And this was in May, and I thought "man this would be a great summer job". When I went to see him, I had no idea what a brakeman was or would do. But I thought this would be a good opportunity for myself. Civil rights were very prevalent back in 1968 when I started working on the railroad, they wanted to hire some Hispanics in the operating department. I said I was very interested because what I had been told the pay was very good. So, he told me " if you're interested, I could call and get you an interview in San Antonio." So, I went to San Antonio and that is basically how I got started. I could tell you my conversation with the people that hired me if you wanted?

ET: Yes, I want to ask you that later.

FRT: Ok.

ET: Ok, so you told me that there was not really a choice for you but I understand that you did went to college, so why did you choose to pursue the railroad instead of finishing your degree, and did you finish your degree?

FRT: So, to answer the first part of that question. I saw this as an opportunity. I had never even thought about working on the railroad. When I went to college, I studied business administration and I had not finished yet in 1968. But I had the opportunity and thought that to take this as a summer job and that job lasted 38 and a half years. When I started off, I was making a good

amount of money. At the time if I had graduated from college and at that time working for IBM would be like working for Microsoft. And the best pay you could get back in 1968 was about 500 dollars a month. And if you worked for IBM you were making 700 bucks a month. You know I wasn't a great student I was about the middle of the road average. So, when I started working for the railroad, after I went and interviewed, I was making a little bit more than that like 700 to 1000 bucks a month and for me, that was a lot of money. Of course, I stuck it out, and of course, I was already dating your grandmother and we had been dating close to five years and we thought about getting married. But my dad told me "son do not think about supporting someone else unless you can support yourself". So anyway, I started working and the whole summer went by and I thought I am making a lot more money than expected so I went off. I married your grandmother in September, September the 19th of 1968, and your uncle Frank came along, well not your uncle, your daddy came along very shortly after. I knew I couldn't afford to not work anymore we had a family and needed a house and car. So, I quit college and came back and graduated after, but I quit college because family was first. So that's why I stayed on the railroad. And you know sometimes we had our ups and downs. Sometimes I had to leave Del Rio and go work somewhere else like in San Antonio and El Paso. These times were hard because you had to find a place to stay and sometimes people did not want to rent me a place, but I persevered and stayed with it. I think it paid off in the end though.

ET: It did. So, what was your position in the railroad?

FRT: Well I started out as a brakeman. And back in the old days what the brakeman would do was actually break the train. Back in the old days before the air brake system was actually put on the individual cars, the brakeman would actually break the train. The brakeman would get on top of the cars and turn the wheel break that you would turn to actually break the cars. But that was the old days, way before my time. But what I did, if the train was in an emergency, you would have to walk the train to see what was wrong and I did that for two years. A little bit over two years. My seniority date was June 5th of 1968 and I did that until July 3 of 1970 and then I went to become a fireman. And this was kind of like the assistant to the engineer and this was a term that was used back in the old days. Because I was never a fireman on a steam engine because that was way before my time. But in order to become an engineer you needed to become a fireman. Because you were like an apprentice engineer. And in two years I became an engineer and that is what I retired as. I stated in engine server and I staired in el Paso and that was the only place I had enough seniority to work in. My seniority was from Del Rio to El Paso. When I retired, I was like the second oldest man on the seniority roster. But that was when I was about to retire. I had a very good job. It was very enjoyable in the early days. It's just liked everything you get used to it. I enjoyed it, put a lot of good food on the table, and sent my kids to college. And they both graduated. And well I did my thing as far as working for the railroad.

ET: Yes, you did. So Guito, we are Mexican American.

FRT: Yes.

ET: And from my understanding, there were not a lot of Mexican Americans that were promoted to be an engineer at the time. So, can you tell me a little bit about that and your experience being a Mexican American on the railroad?

FRT: Well, let me tell you. When I hired out in the operating department, which was people when you became a brakeman you ultimately you were going to be a conductor and when you were a fireman ultimately you were going to become an engineer. But in the operating department, there were no Hispanics at that time. It was kind of like a family job. If your father worked on the railroad, you were going to work on the railroad. But of course, there was a lot of sometimes discrimination and even though you could've done the job, you were not given the opportunity. During that time, the civil rights were very strong. This was during President Johnson's administration. And they were trying to get minorities to work in these departments. So, when I was given this opportunity, I was the very first one to work in the operating department. And then when I moved over to engine service, to become an engineer, I was the first Hispanic to work as an engineer in my division. And you know I always wanted to do a good job so that they could never say "you see you hired that young Mexican boy and he doesn't know what he is doing". I always wanted to be the best. So, I always wanted to do the best job I could do. I was always a dependable and hard worker. I was recognized many times for doing an excellent job. I got a letter from the superintendent, who was the head of the division, recognizing that I always did a good job. Whenever they would bring a special train, say they were going to have the vice president or president of the company come to make a run on a train, they have a special train. Your boss would select who he thought was the best engineer or conductor to be on that train because the boss was going to come through. So, I was selected many times to pull or drive the train. Because we call it around the train point from point "a" to point "b". And if he was drinking coffee you didn't want him to spill that coffee. You had to pull gentle and good. So, you needed to be good at your job and I was selected many times. So, I was pretty proud about that. I also was selected to be an instructor for the young engineers or to administer that railroad test they had to do to become an engineer or get your "FRA" Certification, which was is your Federal Railroad Administration. They would sometimes get selected one of the engineers to do like the testing and do the oral part and the written part so they could get tested. Of course, we had to be, had to have a physical every year to keep your license up, until the day that I retired. So, I was selected a lot to the training part. One time I was selected to, to go to California. And at that time Southern Pacific had a simulator, where they would train engineers. And we had an opportunity to get a contract with Mexico. And being bilingual, well, the program that the students for the US had we translated this program into Spanish and the engineers from Mexico would come over. And the people that would come from Mexico these were people that were awarded the opportunity to come over here because they were very good engineers. Sometimes the superintendents that would come over here would come to us because we would do the work the correct way. You can take a lot of shortcuts on the railroad, running a train. But if you do, sometimes... people do not know how many chemicals are on these trains. Basically, when you see a tank car, sometimes some of these cars have another tank inside because the chemical is so dangerous if it were to explode it would cause havoc on a city. Most of the most hazardous stuff that is transported throughout the United States, it transported by rail. It is a very safe way to do it, but you have to have people that are trained very well so there is no accident and you won't have a derailment so there won't cause anything like in a city any harm from any harsh chemicals that would be in the atmosphere. I would train engineers from Mexico and I was also a part of the staff for the company training the engineers for the U.S. I did that for a year, that was in Cerritos, California, that we did that. Those were some of the safety programs that I had an opportunity to participate in, at that time.

ET: Do did you feel like after you were hired to do all these pretty prestigious jobs within the railroad, did you feel like there were more Mexican Americans around working? Do you feel like you were almost a pioneer in a way for Mexican Americans to have opportunities like this?

FRT: In a way, being the first, and let me tell you a little story when I hired out. And like I told you at the beginning, you know it was a kind of a family job. Our family worked on the railroad from the beginning when the railroad came through here. When I went to the interview, of course since I went to college, I was all decked out in a suit and everything. And I talked to the assistant superintendent which is like the second guy in charge of the San Antonio division. So, I could get interviewed to be hired on the railroad. And the first thing he asked me was, "son do you have any family on the railroad?" And because no Mexican Americans are working in the operating department. So, I said, well I don't know what his first name was because everybody called him Barnet, that was his last name, Barnet. His name is Bubba Barnet. And of course, I was not there calling him Bubba, he was Mr. Barnet to me. And anyway, he said, "do you have anybody who has worked on the railroad?" and I said "yes sir, my dad worked on the railroad until 1964, until he got laid off. My grandfather worked on the railroad and was hired as a section foreman, and he hired out in 1897 and he died on the job in 1929 from a stroke at the Devil's River section. And my great grandfather worked on the railroad, and I said even my family sold the right of way to go through Langtry, Texas when the railroad first went through Texas going through El Paso." And if I remember correctly the secretary's name was Margret, I don't know why that name Margret. But the first thing he said after I told him all of that, was "Margret, give this boy a job." She signed me up and got all my information, my birthday, and my social security number. We had to make some student runs, we had a ninety-rail derail period, is what they call it. In other words, you were going to work for ninety days, and if you made that derail what we used to call it. You know when a train derails you had a big accident, something went haywire because of the trail derail. Well, those 90 days for a young hiree was that if you made it those first ninety days, you were officially on the board, that was your job. But in those ninety days, if you didn't perform or some of those conductors said you did not do well, they would say "this guy isn't going to make it, he isn't railroad material". The railroad would not keep you after those 90 days. There were a lot of people that didn't like you because they didn't like the way you acted or performed, so It was a thank you but no thank you. So, because I was the first at that time, you know I would sometimes see some discrimination. But I always knew how to handle myself because I had a good education. I knew how to defend myself with my mouth--

ET: Yeah.

FRT: I always very respectful; and I got along with everybody and well I got an opportunity and those 90 days turned into 38 years you know.

ET: Yeah.

FRT: And after a year that I hired out, there was another young man that started working named Joey Gonzales. He passed away here a couple years back. But he started working and then in Sanderson they hired another friend of mine, Ace Garcia's, and a matter of fact he was one of your daddy's sponsors going through the church and all that. But he lives in El Paso now. He was also an engineer. And a lot of the young ones now, I don't really know then because I have been

retired now, in two months it will be 14 years since I retired. So, most of the fellows that I worked with are basically most of them are retired or fixing to retire.

ET: Wow. So, were you a part of a Union? And did you ever go on strike (laughs)?

FRT: Oh (laughs). Yes, when I retired, I was the president of the Brotherhood of Locomotors and Trains. And when I started working for the railroad, I was also the local Chairmen for the United Transportation Union. Which was a Union, was for the-- for the brakeman. I was that for a couple of years and about five years before I retired, I became the, I was the president of the Locomotive Engineers. And my Union was Local 566 here in Del Rio, and I retired as the president of that Union. And of course, it's still going on now and what it's called on the railroad is, what it's called a "close shop". Everyone that works on the railroad has to belong to a Union. And that's, that's about the only way we ever got anything from the railroad, through negotiations through the Union. Because when I started to work, you know we used to work sixteen hours. They can, can work us for sixteen hours straight. So uh, if you went to work at four o'clock in the afternoon, you could work for all, all the rest of that afternoon, all that evening, all night, all morning, until, until noon the next day--

ET: Right.

FRT: --and it was real tough. (laughs) And then we got them down to work, uh, from fourteen, from sixteen hours to fourteen hours, and I was twelve hours. But sometimes it depends on how fast you can get from point a to point b, and that'll be your shift. But uh, most of the time it was about 8 hours-- something like that.

ET: So that's my next question was. What were your hours working on the railroad? I think a lot of people don't realize that it's not an eight to five kind of job. It's up at three a.m. to whenever you are down kind of job.

FRT: Well, you are absolutely right. Because most of the time, the railroad gives the maintenance way, the people that maintain the right of way like the tracks and all that. They give them a window for eight hours, and that window they block all a section of a track so they could work on it, fix it, repair it, and do whatever they have to do. So, after that window is open, say they start at eight o'clock, so they don't get through until four o'clock. And then they start calling the trains after four so you might, you might go to work at uh, eight o'clock at night or twelve o'clock, midnight, or one o'clock in the morning. You know most of the time the operating department works, you work at night. And you have to be up. You can't go to—well, you know "I can go to sleep"—no there's no sleeping' on the railroad. We uh, always had to be up and be very conscious because just imagine, if a train has four locomotives, each one of these locomotives will cost about ten and a half dollars. Besides all the cars that you have on the railroad cars, and all the uh, merchandise that you are carrying. So on a whole train, and you are morning off and you are going to sleep and you pass a signal, which is a stop signal, there could be another train after that signal and you could run into it and have a big accident. And besides hurting yourself, or killing yourself, you could hurt someone else too. So--

ET: Right.

FRT: -- uh, when you went to your away from home station, you had to get some rest and get some sleep so you can be prepared. Because when you came back home you could be alert and uh, at 100 percent.

ET: So Guito, my last question for you is, would you—if you could do it all over again, would you still choose to work on the railroad, or would you have thought of a different career for yourself? (breath sound heard)

FRT: Well, I have a degree. After a very long time, after your daddy and your aunt Mayra graduated from college, uh I went back to school to finish up. It took me a little bit longer because I had to do it through night school. And uh twenty-five years later I started back. And uh one and half years I finished up. And I have a degree in business administration. And uh, which I was very, very proud of because you know I have two sisters and they graduated from college, and I uh just wanted to have that diploma to say well you I graduated from college too. But my life on the railroad was very, very rewarding and I enjoyed it. And uh, at the time, I don't know how it is now, I can imagine it's pretty similar to what it was fifteen—almost sixteen years ago. And uh, that's a tough question. (laughing noise from Emily is heard) I had many opportunities to work as a supervisor. I always wanted to be an engineer because it was one of the highest paying jobs you could do. But uh, there were a lot of times you couldn't be at home because you had uh, maybe your wife's birthday or your daughter's birthday or your son's birthday and you couldn't be at home because you had to keep working. But uh I'll never forget that the first time, the first Christmas, that I worked on the railroad. That was one of the most miserable Christmas' that I uh, ever had. Because I was always used to spending Christmas with your, grandmother's family. And we uh, we would always have such a great time together, and we would laugh, and there was such great food and drink and everything. It was just a great time and a lot of fun. Well back then you worked on the railroad, you worked on what was called an "extra board". When you were young, you worked when a regular man did not work. So especially during Christmas time, well the regular guys, they would lay off, and they would give the opportunity for the "extra men" to work. And there was a no guarantee, not guarantee place where you would get paid what you earned because somebody else didn't work. And uh, I remember that we took off on Christmas Eve, and there's a little ghost time west of Langtry Texas-- well it's about 15 miles from Langtry—which is called Pumpville. And uh I got to, flag train, which in other words, they drop me off where the train went, and I had to be there waiting to stop this other train. Because back then of course you didn't have centralized traffic control, you had, everything was by train order. They would print out a piece of paper or you would have to flag a train down to stop it. And I remember spending a couple of hours waiting for this train to get there and uh, it was cold and I was afraid that if I built a fire they wouldn't uh, they would tell me that I couldn't build a fire or you couldn't do this or couldn't do that. And boy that was such a, [it] was a Christmas that almost made me cry. All I wanted to do was to be back home. And that you tell me, would you do it again, maybe I would. (you can hear Emily laugh) I did all of this because of my family. The love of my wife and my family to support, so they would never have to, never have to suffer or go hungry. And I said well, if I have to do this, well this is what I got to do. And uh, maybe I would because I did have a very good life on the railroad and uh, I am very proud of my years that I spent there. And hopefully, the good Lord will send me a good retirement. Well right now I almost have fourteen years, so I'm doing pretty good. (both Emily and Frank start laughing)

ET: I would say you are Guito (while laughing)! Aye, thank you so much for—

FRT: (laughing still) I hope I get to live like my father, your great grandfather who got to live to be ninety-eight and half. (laughs) Maybe I'll get lucky.

ET: (laughs) You for sure will Guito. Thank you so much.

End of Part One Recording of Oral History Interview with Frank R. Torres

Emily Torres: This is Emily Torres. The date is September 30, 2020. I am interviewing Frank R. Torres. I am in Houston, Texas and this a recording over the phone. He is in Del Rio, Texas. This is part two of my interview. I have follow up questions that I want to ask to ask him and I still have his permission to record.

Emily Torres: So Guito, can you tell me any memorable stories that you have on the railroad. Something that you'll never forget. I know we talked about Christmas and how it was sad for you, but do you (laughs) have many happy memories or anything that has just stood out to you (you can hear Frank R. Torres laughing in the background) over your time on the railroad?

Frank R. Torres: (laughs) Well when I first started working for the railroad, I used to have this dream, this bad dream that I always used to wake upright in the middle of it. And uh, it was, every time you were a brakeman when you first hire out you know, when a train would go by, you would have to inspect the train but on the opposite side that it would go by that the train that you were on. And on the mainline, the other train would pass either you would meet the train, or you were on a slow train, he might uh, he might—pass you. and you would have to inspect him on the other side of the train that you were on. So, you would see any abnormalities that you would have to report to the crew that was on the train that would be passing or on the train that was passing you. And uh, well anyways, since you were on the head end of the train, which is the front part of the train—the head end is the front part of the train and the rear end is where the engine, where the caboose used to be. We don't have cabooses anymore, now they have (coughs) an apparatus on the back that tells you when the train is moving and all that. Basically, back then the conductor would tell you when the train was all moving, it was all moving. But anyway, I would always have this dream that uh when this train was passing, it was derailed right at the switch. Because that's where one of the places that a train can derail, is at the switch—because you have some moving parts there or something could switch. But anyway, I would always see these cars going over me. And uh, well when they would have one that hit me, that was when I would wake up. And I had that dream for about three years until I finally got over it. And I think you know; I didn't have it anymore. (can hear a noise from Emily) But memorable—oh Emsie's, there were so many things that I'm trying to remember of what we used to do. You know we had uh, what was sometimes called a "work train". A "work train", was a train that you would get called on to work the rail. In other words, say that you would be hiring the rail, the new rail that was put in, there was a special train that would replace a rail. They would take it off to the side and they had uh, a machine that was called a "burro"—like a donkey, a "burro". Because it was it was a hard-working machine and It had a big. It was would pick up the rail and put it on these cars that were called "gondolas". And uh actually there was like steam, you would kind of take like a (laughs), a steam bath because they were so hot. But, you know, uh, we worked those days. And of course, I'm glad that I was young, a young man because usually those trains that were "work trains", those were the trains that a young engineer would work. But uh, I worked plenty of those. It was good pay, and long hours, and you worked all day, but that is just the way it was.

And I just wanted to let you know that the heat was almost unbearable. But now they have air conditioning on the locomotives and of course very, very nice seats and all that. Of course, you still have to be very, very alert but back then in the old days you would have to be alert and very uncomfortable and I guess they made it that way so you wouldn't go to sleep. There's no sleeping on the railroad. Everybody had to be bright eyes and bushed tail as they used to say.

ET: Yeah—

FRT: But uh, incidents—sometimes because you didn't have to have enough seniority, say your job leader in Del Rio, and there wasn't enough room for you. So, you had to go out of town and have to work in El Paso or work in—I remember one time sleeping in the car because I remember your grandmother was expecting your daddy. And you know I had to go to San Antonio and at that time, well money was really short, and I couldn't afford to stay at a motel or something like that. And I remember having to sleep in the car. It was real cold, after we got married your grandma was expecting your daddy and I had to go to San Antonio to work and this was like in January or February when things get real cold I had to get up and turn the car on because it was so cold and miserable. (noises are heard in the background). But stuff- we would all get through it and experiences that I had. I'm trying to think of some kind of an incident that might have happened, but I can't think of any right now.

ET: That's okay. (laughs) So my last question is, um, what are you doing now, retirement wise? (laughs) You are done with the railroad so do you have any hobbies? Or are you working on something else? Do you have another job? Or, what are you doing now?

FRT: Well when I first retired, your Guita and I were mentors at this elementary school. I was a mentor for this little boy for uh, his father wasn't around. Well—yeah, I'm pretty sure his father wasn't around. And your Guita did the same thing for this little girl, you know the mother wasn't around too much, I guess. (coughs) After I retired, the principal at the school asked me if I would be interested in being a teacher and I said: "Well, uh, I have a degree but it's not in education, I have a degree in business administration". He said, "well you don't have to have one in education. You would be a substitute if you had a certain amount of hours." (noise heard from typing on a keyboard). So, I did that for a semester, and boy I realized being a teacher is a hard job.

FRT: Especially you would get a class with kids that failed or repeating the year. And some of the boys that were there were eighteen. So, I did that for about a year, and then I said you know that this wasn't for me. So luckily during the years that I was working, I bought a couple of rental houses and I inherited them from your great grandfather. I maintained those houses I took care of them and stuff like that. I'm also very active in Masonic work and Free Masonry. I belong to four lodges and I'm a Past Master of three. And when you say a Past Master, means I'm kind of like a past president of these lodges. One here is in Del Rio which is called Val Verde. Val Verde is the name of the County and uh (coughs), Val Verde Lodge number 646. Every Lodge has a number the smaller the number, the older the Lodge. And I belong to the Lodge in Brackettville Las Morris Lodge number 444. Which is the oldest Lodge in the district and I'm a Paster at that Lodge. I'm a Past Master at the Lodge in Eagle Pass—which is 626. And I'm a member of the Lodge in Carrizo Springs—which is Bennet Lodge number 566. And I'm very active in that (coughs). I participate in initiating new members. Masonry is the oldest fraternity in the world.

It's got a lot of members and of course, the founding fathers of a lot of the countries like the United States—George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Paul Revere, and so on and so on, were Masons. And in Texas, well Sam Houston, Travis Bowie, Lorenzo de Zavala, Juan Feline, they were Mason's too. In Mexico, Benito Juarez, Miguel Hidalgo, well, and so forth. And in South America, Simon Bolivar. All these people, when you join it's up to you to learn the history of Masonry. But you get a feeling that you belong to this great fraternity that I'm a member of. I've been a member for almost forty-nine years. My father was a Mason and he was like sixty-two years before he passed away. And your daddy is a Mason and he was initiated, and I had the honor and privilege to initiate him in the year 2000. So, he has been a Mason for twenty years. And uh, your Uncle Memo is a Mason, he's a member of a Lodge there in San Antonio. Your great grandfather on both sides were Mason's. Your Guita's father was a 33rd Degree Mason and a grandmaster for the state of Coahuila, Mexico. And I participate a lot in that. I guess if you want to consider that a hobby (can hear Emily laugh). I basically don't fish or hunt or something like that because I'm so active in fixing the houses and doing stuff and work all around the houses, so I don't have much time to do much else. But I participate a lot, in Masonic work.

ET: Well, that is so cool and so interesting, that you are so involved in that. Um, I think that is all that I wanted to ask you about. Just if you had any stories or reflections, in which you talked about, and what you were doing in retirement now that you are done. So, again Guito thank you so much. I really appreciate your time and talking—

FRT: You're welcome, you're welcome. I guess I've been the past preside of the Credit Union that we have here in Val Verde, that we have here in Del Rio. And the past president of Lodges that I've belonged to. And of course, all the stuff like that (coughs) that used to keep me pretty busy. But, well now I kind of hang around the house a little bit more. But everything is good, everything is good, life is good—I can't complain. You know I wish that our health remains good and your grandmother and I are pretty healthy right now. Of course, we can still drive and do just about everything I used to. Of course, I can't do it as quick or as fast as I used to because it just takes me longer to recoup from whatever I did the day before. (starts laughing)

ET: (laughs) Right.

FRT: (laughs) but I think I'm so blessed to have five grandchildren; you are one of them. And it's just a blessing that everyone is in good health and some are out of college and you and others are fixing to start college. And I hope that all of y'all are successful in your college careers and start another episode in your life. And I think that it's going to be good.

End of Recording.