

South Texas Stories Podcast

Emily Torres

Title: A Railroad Family

<<train whistle can be heard with introduction music>>

Introduction

Emily Torres (host): When you go over railroad tracks today in Texas, what do you think of? "What kind of cargo is this train carrying?" "Is there actual stuff in there?" Or do you think QUICK, drive fast over the tracks because I don't want to be stopped behind a train? After all, you always get the longest wait time? Or "Why do we even need trains?" I'll tell you what I think about my family, specifically, my grandfather. Hi, y'all; my name is Emily Torres, and I'm a Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi student! I wanted to share this story and history with you today because the railroad has been a part of my family for generations. We can date back to knowing that my family has worked on the railroads as late as the 19th century. Therefore, the railroad and the history it holds within my family means a lot to me. I've grown up hearing some of these railroad stories countless times and always thought they were fascinating. So I hope you enjoy listening and learning about the railroad with me and my grandfather today.

Emily Torres: First, I think it's fitting to give you some history on Texas Railroads. To give you a brief rundown, railroads in Texas were first constructed "in 1851, and the first portion of track opened in 1853. The Galveston and Red River Railway Company was chartered in 1848, but this company did not break ground for its railway until 1853." (1) Texas was running into issues trying to transport things by ships. Therefore, finding a cheaper and faster route for the transportation of goods was imperative for industries. However, keeping up with the construction and funding of the railroad was a complicated process. First, you would have to acquire the land, then pay for the materials to construct the railroad, and of course, find a way to pay for the labor and manual aspect that was a part of this significant construction process. So understandably, this process was an enormous task. Not to mention the legal struggles that came along. Everything needed to be funded and approved through the government. So if a senator did not want to support the land on which the railroad was intended to be built upon, it was not constructed, obviously.

<<Train Whistle sound can be heard>>

1. Walker, Arnold, and Bradley. "The History of Railroads in Texas: Resources & Info." *Home Improvement Tips & Advice from HomeAdvisor*, 10 Aug. 2020, www.homeadvisor.com/r/texas-railroad-history/.
2. Carrillo, Karen Juanita. "How the Chicano Movement Championed Mexican-American Identity." History.com. A&E Television Networks, September 18, 2020. <https://www.history.com/news/chicano-movement>.

Emily Torres: My grandfather, Frank R. Torres, is one of the most loving people I know. His infectious smile and contagious life can light up a room. His demeanor shines when he talks about his family and how proud he is of us, but something inside of him lights up when he talks about Guito, which is the nickname we call my grandfather, working on the railroad. My father's office has pictures of my grandfather in his uniform or in him in front of trains. My little brother's early love and passion for trains have stemmed from hearing the stories we have all heard as a family. However, I have never sat down with him as an adult now and asked about his railroad experiences. I never asked him about "fun stories" or working on the railroad for 38 years has affected him.

Frank R. Torres (Interviewee): 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.

ET: This then sparked my interest in talking about being a Mexican American on the railroad. My grandfather was the first Mexican American to be promoted to becoming an Engineer in his division. This was a big deal because in 1968, there were still not many minorities who were being considered for this position at the time in the peak of the civil rights movement. "In the 1960s, a radicalized Mexican-American movement began pushing for a new identification. The Chicano Movement, aka *El Movimiento*, advocated social and political empowerment through a *chicanismo* or cultural nationalism." ... "Throughout the early 20th century, many Mexican-Americans attempted to assimilate and even filed legal cases to push for their community to [be recognized](#) as a class of white Americans, so they could gain civil rights. But by the late 1960s, those in the Chicano Movement abandoned efforts to blend in and actively embraced their full heritage." ... "Leaders in the movement pushed for change in multiple parts of American society, from labor rights to education reform to land reclamation." (2)

Frank R. Torres: 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 firemen 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 family job. If your

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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, Civil Rights were very strong. This was during President Johnson 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.

<<music can be heard>>

ET: Mexican Americans on the railroad were the foundation of constructing railroads in Texas. The railroad has been a job my family has done since the late 1800s. My great, great grandfather Aramante Torres left home at the age of 16 to start working on the railroad as a "water boy". He was then promoted to section foreman and died on 1929 from a stroke at the Devil's River Section. My great grandfather, Francisco Torres, then decided to start working on the railroad at a young age and was a brakeman until he was laid off in the 1950s. And finally my grandfather as we know started his journey on the railroad. He was a brakeman, a fireman and finally an engineer. It meant a lot to him to become the first railroad engineer in his family. Like he said, he always wanted to be the best and he worked long, long hours to achieve that goal.

ET: I then asked him, how were his hours on the railroad. From memory I knew this wasn't exactly a 9-5 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." (Frank R. Torres direct quote from oral history narration) He said you had to be awake and alert 100% of the time. Trains typically carry materials that are hard to transport by plane or ship. Therefore, my grandfather said, at times they would carry harsh chemicals. Can you imagine if they had gotten into an accident and had a massive chemical spill? Not to mention how much money that would cost you and the train.

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<<train sounds can be heard>>

I then asked my grandfather a rather personal question I think he hadn't been asked yet by a family member and that was: "would you do it all over again?, if you could go back in time, would you still choose to work on the railroad? would you make the sacrifices for your family all over again?" He paused and laughed and then proceeded to tell me a story about a memory he had working on the railroad. This is a perfect example of how hard it was and the sacrifices you had to make.

FRT: "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." (direct quote from Frank R. Torres from oral history recording). However. In the end my grandfather claimed he would do it again because of the love he had for his family. He never wanted anyone to go hungry and he never wanted them to run out of money. "I did have a very good life on the railroad and uh, I am very proud of my years that I spent there."

<<Wind Chimes can be heard>>

ET: My grandfather now spends his time a proud retiree in Del Rio, Texas. He lives there with his wife, Tina Torres, my grandmother, and their four dogs. I asked him what he was up to now

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after 14 years of being retired. He is a proud Mason and has been the Grand Master at least five lodges in the Val Verde, Bracket Ville, Morris, Eagle Pass, and Carrizo Springs—which is Bennet Lodge. Masonry is the oldest fraternity in the world. Some of our founding fathers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were a part of this fraternity. Masonry is still a huge factor in my grandfather's retired life. He still visits the Lodge at least once a week and interacts with his fellow brothers in the area. My grandfather also decided to finish his college degree. He only had 15 credits left. So he finished up his degree in Business Administration from Sul Ross University 38 years later. He even carries a mini-sized copy of his degree in his wallet. Education was a significant factor to him. He always tells me, "Mija it doesn't matter how long it takes you to finish, just FINISH".

Conclusion:

<<Music can be heard>>

ET: Looking back, I am extremely thankful for the stories my grandfather provided me. These are recorded memories and stories that my family and I will have for the rest of my life. The stories that I had heard over and over again as a child now finally make sense when you listen to them as an adult. The long years of hard work, sacrifice, and dedication my grandfather had to the railroad are inspiring. The fact that he paved the way for several other Mexican Americans to become engineers in his county makes him a pioneer and inspiration to many other young workers. I hope these stories have brought you joy to listen to as they have to me. And to my grandfather, Guito, I love you and can't thank you enough for providing us you're your personal stories of trials and tribulations on the railroad. You are an amazing grandfather!

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Music

Artist: Felix.blume

Title: Mexican Mariachis playing 'las mañanitas' on the square Garibaldi in Mexico City

Date Created: February 14, 2014

Artist: P & L Railroad

Title: Hillbilly Pudhouse Night

Date Created: July 18, 2017

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Sounds

Artist: markedit

Title: Train upon us

Date Created: June 12th, 2012

Artist: acclivity

Title: bluebell steam railway

Date Created: November 15, 2006

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