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Coming of Age During the War: Reminiscences of an Albuquerque Hispana

CARMEN R. CHAVEZ

Looking back to the period of World War II through the filter of so many years is not easy; memories tend to become opaque and distorted—so unreal that sometimes you wonder if the events recalled happened or you imagined them. Of course, most of us who lived through the attack on Pearl Harbor vividly remember what we were doing when we heard the news. I recall as clearly as if it were yesterday. On 7 December 1941, my sisters and I had just returned from Sunday mass when my father, who never went to mass “because mass was for women” told us the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. It seemed as if the shock was felt throughout the United States. I felt that the attack and the following declaration of war were a national catastrophe.

At the time, I was a first-semester senior at Albuquerque High School. The railroad had transferred my father and family from Amarillo, Texas. We moved into Barelás, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on South Fourth Street near the railroad shops. The war brought many changes to our neighborhood. When the war mobilization began, the first thing that happened was that most of the young men disappeared. The boys left the almost-military Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps of the 1930s and entered the New Mexico National Guard.

The CCC was an effort to counter Depression-caused poverty and unemployment by creating education and job programs for people, especially young men, who lived in lower-income areas. Our neighborhood welcomed the work program because it made jobs available. Fred Chávez, who later became my husband, was a schoolmate and one of the group of teenagers who walked back and forth to Albuquerque High

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Walking home along Central Avenue from Albuquerque High School, Spring 1942. Front row, left to right: Magdalena Rodríguez, Bernice Sena, Carmen Rodríguez (Chávez). Photograph courtesy of Rodríguez family.

School from Barelás. I can remember Fred telling us about Orlando, his oldest brother, who had joined the CCC. Once a week, army trucks would pick up volunteers from different specified locations and transport them to work areas. The men were housed at the work site and came home only on weekends.

Orlando lied about his age when he found out about the New Mexico National Guard. As the oldest son of a single-parent (mother) household, he felt that the pay and the benefits were better in the Guard than in the CCC. The Guard, however, was a cavalry unit and the Barelas recruits could not even ride bicycles much less horses and they were expected to become proficient horsemen. Orlando fell off his horse on the first try and broke an arm in several places. The fracture did not mend right and he was discharged while all his friends went to war.

The federal government also created the National Youth Administration (NYA) in 1933 in order to help low-income students struggling to continue their education. It was a nationwide vocational program operated and controlled jointly by the CCC and the NYA. The final draft of the policy, which included financial aid to state educational agencies, was approved in the last months of 1941.¹ Although the aim of both programs was to give financial assistance to lower-income people, the aid went primarily to men; not many young women were hired. The CCC, geared more toward hard, physical labor, appealed more to men. The NYA, on the other hand, focused more on students and after the war broke out, more women looked into it as an option and were hired. During my junior and senior years, several of my female classmates were hired as office aides. I was hired to grade papers for a Spanish class and to work at the Albuquerque High School library as part of the NYA program.

I think that since many young Hispanic men had jobs in road construction and forest area conservation work under the CCC, the switch from CCC camps to military camps seemed natural. Because there were few other jobs available, most CCC recruits joined the National Guard. The New Mexico National Guard, known as the 200th Field Artillery, consisted mostly of Hispanic New Mexicans and was one of the first units shipped overseas to the Philippines. When the United States declared war on Japan, the unit was already in the Pacific. Subsequently, the 200th Field Artillery fought in the Philippines and on Bataan. Most of the men from the unit did not survive the Japanese prison camps. The few who did, died soon after liberation.

Another dramatic change in our neighborhood was the loss of community cohesiveness. Before the war, our neighborhood was very close-knit, like a family. Whereas the draft took our young men, many families left Barelas to seek employment in west coast wartime industries. Most never returned. The promise of new, well-paying jobs attracted a mass migration of people from the small rural towns in the South, the Southwest, and the Midwest to the industrial centers of the North and West Coast. This exodus had a lasting effect on the history of my neighborhood. Whole families left Barelas in search of jobs elsewhere while other ethnic groups moved into our predominantly Hispanic community. The

constant appearance of strangers was one reason we could not forget the war. Death was among the most bizarre of these strangers; it made sure that war was never far from our thoughts, even for a moment. We always knew about war casualties in our neighborhood. Western Union messengers were frequent and unwelcome visitors in the surrounding area. I remember holding my breath as a uniformed messenger searched for a correct address. Fred's mother lived two blocks down from our house and I dreaded it when a messenger headed that way. After all these years, thinking back, I was always relieved when the bicycle turned away from my street. The telegraph carrier became the harbinger of death—almost every day another son, brother, or father was lost. Gold stars appeared on many windows, indicating to passersby that proud mothers had sons serving their country, not just the number of sons lost in the war. Even after a Western Union visit, though, the stars often remained in the windows.

The members of my high school graduating class were greatly affected by the war. The class of 1942 was supposed to have the largest number of graduating seniors in the history of the school. After Pearl Harbor, though, all the young men who were eighteen or older either volunteered for the armed forces or were drafted. Consequently, many diplomas were presented "in absentia." After the war, the young men who came back seemed so different—so changed, so much older. If they had not received their diplomas before the war, they chose not to go back to high school. Many instead applied for a General Education Diploma (GED). Great numbers of the returning GIs, as Government Inductees were called, took advantage of the GI Bill of Rights, a federal program established to enable the readjustment and education of returning veterans. That law helped many go to colleges or trade schools.

While the war raged on all fronts, it seemed that the whole nation, like my neighborhood, shared a great feeling of patriotism. Propaganda about a "just war" and the war to end all wars abounded on the radio, in the newspapers, and on huge posters depicting Uncle Sam pointing his finger. War propaganda was pervasive. Many sixteen- and seventeen-year-old youths enlisted. Too young to do so, some had parental signatures and others simply lied about their ages. Nationalism and camaraderie seemed to permeate American culture, especially among men. I can remember one young man from our neighborhood who came home and killed himself when he was classified 4F, which meant not draftable. His mother said that he could not face his friends knowing he would not serve at their sides.

Many of the neighborhood boys volunteered in groups and for the same unit hoping to serve together. They did not always succeed. Eighteen-year-old men were drafted into the army and had little say about where and with whom they served. Many of the Barelás youth,

however, volunteered days *before* their eighteenth birthday so that they could choose other branches of the service. Fred and some of his friends wanted to join the Navy. I have never understood why people who lived in the desert and swam in mud holes chose to serve at sea. Nevertheless, in July 1943, Fred and two other young Barelás guys went to the draft board to volunteer. Only Fred was accepted; the other two were classified 4F. Fred ended up in the Navy with thousands of others, but not with his friends from Barelás.

My family had no male kin in the service. My father and mother were all the family my sisters and I had in the United States, and, since the oldest were all girls, none of my immediate family went to war. My sisters and I, however, had fiancées serving in different war theaters. The armed forces responded to the manpower shortage by creating service organizations for women such as the Navy WAVEs, the Women's Army Corps (WACs), the Coast Guard Spars, the Women's Air Force (WAFs—later WASPs [Women's Air Force Service Pilots]), and the Women's Auxiliary Marine Corps. Military service for women began with these wartime associations. During the war, more than 350,000 women served in the different branches of the service. Some served as noncombat air force pilots at home and abroad and others worked civil service jobs on military bases.²

My father, however, with his typical old Mexico morality insisted that "the service was not the place for nice Mexican women." My sisters and I felt fortunate not to be drafted. My father would not have us join the service, but he did not feel lucky that we were all girls. With the coming of the war, his role changed to include guarding us from the "foreign" influences invading our world to protecting us from "friendly fire." Late in 1939, the army leased 2,000 acres of land near Albuquerque's municipal airport and began the preliminary stages of construction for a new army air base. The War Department had decided to locate Kirtland Air Force Base near Albuquerque, and that meant hundreds of single servicemen on the prowl for entertainment and dates. It was not until June 1941 that the first contingent of bombardier trainees began their training. On 25 February 1942, Albuquerque Army Air Base officially became Kirtland Air Force Base. The base became a flight school for training mechanics, pilots, glider pilots, and navigators, but it was best-known for the 5,719 bombardier students who had received their training there. By war's end, the base had become a significant fixture in all the Albuquerque communities as well as in the military world.³

Before the war, Albuquerque was almost semirural—definitely a Saturday-night town. The main center of activity was downtown, around Fourth and Central. In 1937, with the paving completed, the corner of Albuquerque's Fourth Street and Central Avenue became the regional crossroads of the north-south Highway 85 and the legendary highway



Apprentice Seaman Fred Chávez, Jr. at the United States Federal Post Office building, Gold Avenue side, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Photograph courtesy of Chávez family.

Route 66. That same year, the New Mexico Relief and Security Authority was established to secure work on road-related federal projects for the state's unemployed. Although Route 66 had been hard-topped and completed in California and other neighboring states, the surfacing was not finished across New Mexico until 1937, finally linking the country from the coast to coast.⁴

Albuquerque's retail businesses and most eating establishments were located within a ten-block area downtown. Young servicemen from the newly created Kirtland Air Force Base were off on weekends and they congregated by the hundreds around the shopping areas looking for company and excitement. My father did not want his daughters to provide that excitement. He was hard-pressed to use his precious gas-

rationing stamps to drive around, after work, to the back entrances of Kress, Woolworth's, and Montgomery Ward stores to get his daughters out of harm's way—away from the hordes of “foreigners” invading downtown Albuquerque on Saturday nights.

Looking back through this end of the telescope of time, it seems almost unbelievable, perhaps ironic, that war brought economic opportunity to the whole nation, even to our Hispanic community, but it did. Prior to World War II, domestic work, waitressing, and laundry were the only areas of employment open to Spanish or Mexican women. The proportion and numbers of Mexican women working outside the home increased dramatically by 1930. I remember reading somewhere that in 1930 only 10.1 percent of Mexican women wage earners held clerical or sales-related jobs, but by 1950, 23.9 percent were working in these occupations. The war forced a revolution of ethnic minorities in the workplace. Correspondent Jim Stratton writes that, “In a society designed and run by White men, Blacks, [Mexicans], and women were second-class citizens.” He adds that President Roosevelt, during a 1940s Columbus Day speech told the country that many employers disliked to hire minorities, but that the nation could no longer indulge in such prejudices.⁵

Perhaps because of the president's mandate, and certainly because of the tremendous labor shortage caused by the draft, opportunities for employment expanded for white women. As they moved to better paying positions, the gap they left was filled by Hispanas. In 1942, my oldest sister started working as a salesclerk at Kress, my second sister took a job at Woolworth's, and I went to work at Montgomery Ward. I had to wait, however, until my seventeenth birthday, even though I had already graduated from high school. Montgomery Ward and the retail business then became my life. I was promoted to department manager the following spring. My first duty was managing the Men's Underwear and Accessories department. A woman running a men's department would have been unheard of before the war, and even women's departments were headed by male managers. By my eighteenth birthday, I was in charge of Housewares, one of the larger departments. Comparing President Clinton's aim of \$5.00 an hour minimum wage and the current, traditional forty-hour work week to my wartime twenty-five-cents-an-hour for a forty-eight hour week seems almost surreal. But then, so do the social and economic roles of today's women.

The existence of an air force base in the Albuquerque vicinity changed more than the economic patterns of the area. The new government industry disturbed the demographic, cultural, and social lifestyle of our neighborhood. There was a tremendous influx of young, mostly unmarried, Anglo men into our quiet and unsophisticated southwestern city. Most of the servicemen were lonely and away from home, many probably for the first time. To us, they mirrored the images that filled the

pages of the daily letters from neighborhood boys—letters that were gutted by the thorough scrutiny of war information censors. In fact, some of the letters were so heavily edited that the only words left were occasional “and”s, “the”s, and salutations. I remember Fred wrote often and asked me to send him something, but the words were always cut out by the censors. It was not until after he came home that I found out what he had been trying to communicate. He told me that he had been asking me to send him some gum hoping that I could decipher that his unit was stationed on Guam. He was part of the Naval Construction Battalion, or the “SeaBees,” who built the landing strips for the famous B-29s that the United States used to bomb Japanese installations. Unfortunately, time and circumstances obliterated all our precious correspondence and now we only have our memories as reminders of that time.

World War II brought many demographic changes to Albuquerque, as well. For example, many Kirtland soldiers married local Hispanas and settled in Albuquerque, creating more Anglo-surnamed families that were actually biracial. Other servicemen fell in love with the Southwest and brought their families to live here after the war. In 1942, Albuquerque, the Southwest, and even our neighborhood were as foreign to people from other parts of the United States as they were to us. Prior to World War II, each section of the country was a different world.

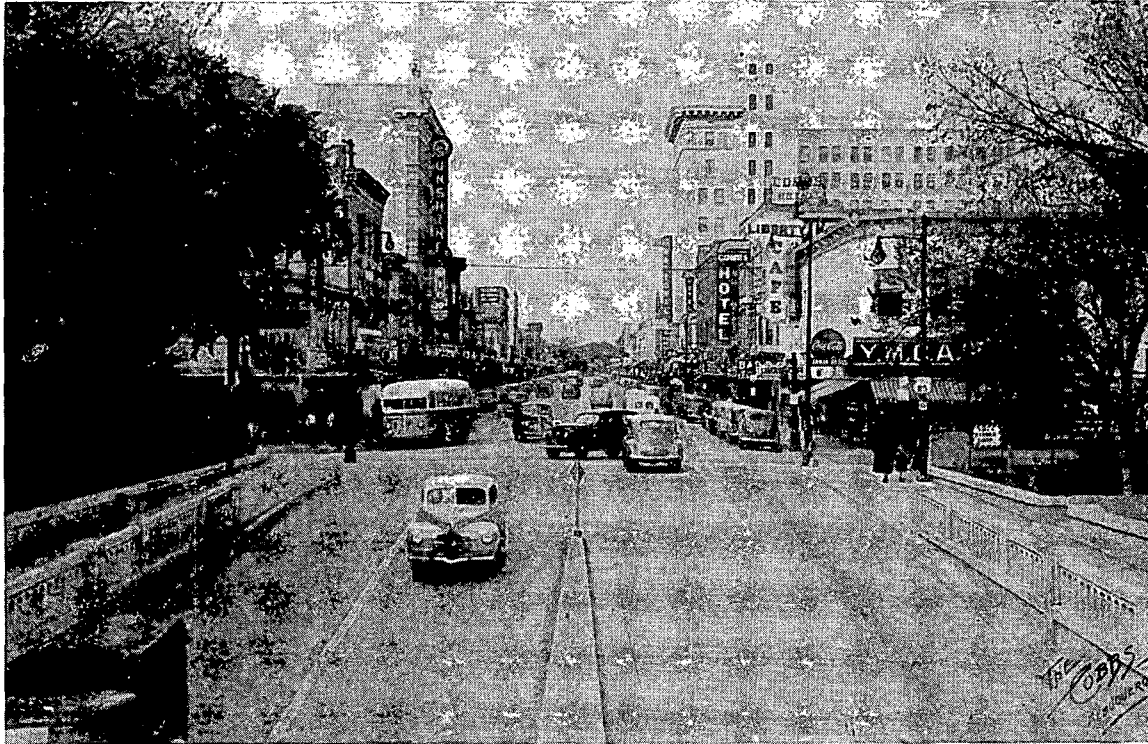
The war also created shortages and calls for rationing from all Americans. We all had to save gas and families received ration stamps allocating a set number of gallons per week or month. Using less gasoline was not really unbearable for my family. We lived close to town and walked everywhere anyway. Encouraged by war propaganda to ride bicycles and save gas, my sisters and I bought and learned to ride our family's first bicycle. Albuquerque even briefly had its own Women's Bicycle Corps. We also heard rumors that women would act as messengers in case of an attack because of the proximity of the base.⁶

Rationing, shortages, and war bond drives became a way of life for all civilians and the people of Barelás were no exception. We all voluntarily deducted money (about twenty-five cents) from each weekly paycheck to buy war bonds. Fred and I used my bonds—worth three hundred seventy-eight dollars—for the down payment on our home, which cost three hundred eighty dollars. We still live in that house today. For my family, meat and sugar rationing did cause some inconveniences. As we had during the Depression, we continued gardening, maintaining a so-called “victory garden” that included vegetables and fruit trees. We also raised chickens and a nanny goat. The chickens and eggs were lifesavers; they were not subject to rationing and proved a great source of protein for our family of twelve—ten children and my folks. Sugar was at a premium. Sometimes, it was unavailable even if we had ration coupons. We used honey, therefore, as a sweetener, which worked quite



Carmen R. Chávez walking west on Central Avenue, 1946, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Photograph courtesy of Chávez family.

well. But for me, the hardest thing was not having any meat. While I was working, the evening meal was served early to accommodate my father's schedule. By the time my older sisters and I arrived home most evenings, there was little to eat besides beans and vegetables so I might not have gotten meat anyway. We could buy bologna and bacon at the little neighborhood store since they were not rationed. But soon, we grew so sick of bologna that we could not even look at it; bacon, meanwhile,



Downtown Albuquerque, Central Avenue, looking west, 1940-45. Photo courtesy of Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, negative no. 000-119-0695.

became too expensive to have every day. Bacon did prove useful in other ways. The fat was another component of the war. We saved cans of fat and took them to designated collection centers for use as munitions and machinery grease. We recycled nearly everything for the war effort. Ironically, my sisters and I survived on a healthy wartime diet that consisted of little red meat and few sweets.

World War II also prompted changes in clothing and fashions worn not only by my family, but my neighbors. Slacks became fashionable and acceptable everyday wear for women. Seeing the current-day ease and acceptance of trousers as women's apparel, it's almost unbelievable that my sisters and I had to ask permission from our parents and from our employers in order to wear slacks during the war. For women, slacks were a successful and instantaneous fashion innovation. Female employment in wartime industrial work and women's entrance into the military world were probably responsible for these changes. Men's fashions changed also, but less dramatically. In an effort to save material for more crucial service uniforms, manufacturers made cuffless trousers and coats that sported narrower lapels.

I found that the disappearance of sheer prewar silk stockings seemed like the greatest of hardships. The rayon stockings that replaced the war-essential silks were ugly, heavy, and impossible to keep in place. Sheer nylon stockings were not available until war industries invented synthetic fabrics. Of course, during the war years, we all understood that silk was needed for wartime parachutes, so we put up with the rayon stockings, though we hated them.

Another innovation brought about by the war was the introduction of synthetic detergents that changed the soap industry and replaced the fat, glycerine, and lye laundry soap that we had previously used. During World War II, the scarcity of animal fat and vegetable oil created a shortage of soap. Housewives were asked to save lard, bacon, and other animal fats for the war effort. Scientists, for their part, were obliged to formulate a replacement for the much needed soap. By the end of the war, new detergents were accepted for industrial as well as household use.⁷

I remember that even for men either too old or 4F, working conditions changed. My father was a machinist for the Santa Fe Railroad. During the war years, he never worked his regular week. Barelas railroaders, along with the rest of the nation, worked endlessly around the clock for the war effort. The nation's railroads were at peak activity with the movement of troops and war materials, so my father's work week was never really over. He had no sons to offer his adoptive country, so he



Wartime introduction of slacks for women, 1943. (Left to right) Carmen R. Chávez, sister Magdalena, and brother Frank in the back yard of family home, Albuquerque. Photograph courtesy of Rodríguez family.

Carmen R. Chávez (center) with friends in front of Albuquerque's Alvarado Hotel/Santa Fe Railroad station courtyard. Photograph courtesy of Rodríguez family.



gave of himself. Men who worked for the railroad were encouraged to promote railroad work to their sons; my father did so to several young men from our neighborhood. He was especially successful with the young men who sought to meet his daughters.

Like many neighborhood families, my family did not remain completely intact during the war. Albuquerque neighborhoods, like the rest of the country, had lines of couples making the traditional trip to the altar as soon as the servicemen were discharged. Fred Chávez and I were going to get married during the war, but since we were only seventeen and eighteen respectively, our parents would not hear of it. So, we planned to elope.

Fred knew he was going to the South Pacific even though he had trained in Norfolk, Virginia. It was only logical, we thought, that he would go across the United States to get to the Pacific coast. Well, God and the navy had other plans and they took him around the Panama Canal on the *North Star*, a troop ship. Another reason for transporting troops on ships was due to the heavy burden placed on railroads by the army's redeployment of troops and war materials across the United States.⁸ Consequently, Fred and I did not see each other again for two-and-a-half years. I missed him terribly, but ironically got to know him better while he was gone because I spent more time with his family. Our letters also proved a valuable way to get to know each other, in spite of the censors. We had to really explain things in order to convey how we were feeling so that the other could understand. We were finally married three months after Fred was discharged and my sisters each got married soon after that. In my family, other weddings created extended relationships and increased the number in our immediate family considerably. These postwar marriages completed the disruption of the once tightknit Barelás community.

Although the war lasted only a few years, the transformations it wrought have lasted several lifetimes. The sheltered Hispanic men and women who grew up in Barelás saw different worlds and experienced different lives. They could never again live their lives of the prewar years. It seemed everyone wanted something different. The government, with its GI Bill for education, made it possible for men—even those from lower-income families—to go to college. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) made long-term, low-interest housing available for returning GIs and their families. Many returning veterans did not want to seek housing in their old neighborhoods, and there was a mass exodus to suburbs for reasonably-priced housing. This migration created new neighborhoods and drained older inner city areas.



Carmen R. Chávez on a Sunday afternoon bicycle ride at the corner of Fourth Street and Hazeldine Avenue, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1945. Photograph courtesy of Rodriguez family.

Women, too, had new expectations. My sisters and I tried to return to accepted, prewar female roles, but through earning our own wages, we had a taste of independence we hadn't known before the war. We retained a restless yearning for that financial freedom we had enjoyed during wartime. As I look back today, I cannot believe that I bought into the nationwide propaganda calls for women to leave wartime jobs and to go back to the kitchen. But I did. I gave up my job, mainly because most employed women, including me, felt a social backlash as returning troops pushed female workers out of their wartime employment. It was hard, though, giving up my job. My sisters and I had learned how wonderful it

was to have our own paycheck and our own money. It was hard to have to go back to receiving an allowance from men. The women of my neighborhood had changed as much as the men who went to war. We had developed a feeling of self-confidence and a sense of worth. We may not have changed *our* lives very much but we have been there to encourage our daughters to broaden their horizons. We, the women who came of age during World War II, feel that we changed. And, although many of us had to go back to the domestic sphere, we retained the spirit of change. I think that we helped create a somewhat different world for our daughters and granddaughters. A world where anything is possible. Not easy, perhaps, but possible.

NOTES

1. "The Civilian Conservation Corps, The National Youth Administration, and The Public Schools," *Educational Policies Commission* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Education, 1941), 3.

2. Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters From American Women on the Home Front* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 145.

3. Allan E. Putnam, *A History of Kirtland Air Force Base, 1928-1982* (Albuquerque: Kirtland Air Force Base, 1982), 27-39.

4. Quinta Scott and Susan Croce Kelly, *Route 66: A Photographic Essay* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 30-31.

5. Jim Stratton, "War Forced Minority Revolution, Blacks, Women Vowed to Hold Onto New Roles," *Albuquerque Journal*, 14 May 1995, B-1.

6. Paula King, "A Willing Patriot. She Was Ready. But War Never Called," *Albuquerque Journal*, 4 June 1995. Sage Section, 11. King writes about the preparations taken in January or February 1942 to warn the Albuquerque residents in the event of an invasion by using a group of volunteers named the Women's Bicycle Corps. The group did not last very long, but it does illustrate the involvement of women in home defense.

7. Ann Bramson, *Soap: Making It, Enjoying It* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1975), 86-87.

8. Litoff and Smith, 152.

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