Ruben Salazar: A Bridge Between Two Societies

By Migdalia Howell, Fernando Medina, Kelsey Torres and Isabel Hernandez

Why, ask some Mexican-Americans, can't we just call ourselves Americans?" Ruben Salazar posed this question in a 1970 article. In the past, Mexican-Americans suffered from inequality in many areas of American life. For some, they were too Mexican and for others, they were too "American" or Anglo. Many lived what they considered a "second-class life."

Salazar, born in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, and raised in El Paso, Texas, was to be a man of many firsts. He was the first Mexican-American journalist at the *El Paso Herald-Post* in the mid-1950s when Edward Pooley was editor and championed the rights of Mexican-Americans. Salazar was also the first Mexican-American journalist to work for the *Los Angeles Times*, the first to be sent as a foreign correspondent and the first to have his own column in a major American newspaper. His achievements were all due to the consistent quality in his work and his belief that American residents should be treated as equals.

For years there was a clear divide between mainstream society and racial minorities in the U.S. While attempts to remove such divisions existed, discrimination continued. Historian Julia Young recalled that with the influx of immigrants to the U.S. after World War II, discrimination increased, in particular against Mexican immigrants. In the late 1960s, the U.S. began experiencing resistance by Mexican-American groups, and the Chicano Movement was born. Ruben Salazar was one of the first voices for the Mexican-American community, and he stood up for what he saw as injustice. Salazar became the bridge that attempted to connect mainstream American society with Americans of Mexican descent in a time of conflict.

According to the Ruben Salazar Project created by the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, Salazar was born in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, on March 3, 1928; his parents Salvador and Luz Salazar moved to El Paso shortly after. Here he attended Lamar Elementary School, and on Jan. 17, 1946, he graduated from El Paso High School. In 1947, he applied to become a naturalized citizen, a process that took almost six years because of bureaucratic red tape. Salazar studied at Texas Western College, now the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), from 1946 to 1948, working with his father in a jewelry shop for the next two years. Salazar enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1950, serving in Germany. He returned to El Paso to continue his education and graduated from Texas Western on May 30, 1954, with a B.A. in journalism.

Luz McFarland, Salazar's sister, recalled that her brother always had a desire to read and received a certificate for reading in elementary school. "He was always getting certificates from school for reading books. He made good grades in school and always liked to write," McFarland reminisced in a 1995 *El Paso Times* article by Ken Flynn.

His college education was interrupted by full-time work and military service, but he graduated, a feat that was difficult for most students in the 1950s, but especially so for Mexican-Americans. Salazar had initially thought of studying mechanical engineering, but his desire to write was much stronger. He would become a remarkable writer, one ahead of his time.

Ruben Salazar at *Herald-Post* desk ***(Courtesy of the University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department)***

Noted El Paso educator, artist, humanitarian and UTEP alumna Rosa Ramirez Guerrero lived in the same neighborhood on Arizona Street as Salazar, who was eight or more years older than she. They both attended El Paso High School at different times. In an interview with Isabel Hernandez, Guerrero described his early impact on her:

My late husband used to deliver the newspaper to him and his family. [In] elementary school I used to run home to see the El Paso-Herald Post where he was a writer. You can say my encounter [with Salazar] was when I read all his articles. He was one of the first Mexican-American writers for the Post. Being a first impressed me tremendously. So I felt I knew him through his writings.

While attending El Paso High School, Salazar was part of the school paper, *The Tattler*. At Texas Western, he joined *The Prospector.* His writing style progressed from being observational and non-controversial to political and opinionated, according to Kira Brekke in the Ruben Salazar Project. During his sophomore year he became editor and started a column named "This Shot World." Salazar's journalistic voice was just beginning to develop. His focus shifted with time to a refined direct commentary on a range of topics, including segregation.

Salazar then entered a new era as a journalist. In 1955, he started working for the *El Paso Herald-Post.* He produced a remarkable story when he pretended to be drunk and was intentionally arrested. His article "25 Hours in City Jail—'I Lived in a Chamber of Horrors'" revealed through investigative reporting the disgusting conditions of the city jail. He was in Tank 6 where he vomited twice because of the smell. He wrote:

Tank 6 is a disgusting combination of live and inanimate filth. The men are systematically killing themselves: some with liquor, the rest with narcotics. The cells are like pigsties. There are two stinking toilets in the 22-foot-long tanks. At one end of the tank is a bathtub. The whole inside is one solid black bathtub ring. The "cots" are thin slabs of interwoven steel strips attached to the walls. One blanket is given each man.

Salazar had arrived at the jail at 8 a.m., but by 2:30 p.m. he saw who the "bosses" were, the chain gang who had come in from work and entered the tank with authority. The meek "friendly" inmates made for their cells immediately. At 4:40 p.m. the men were fed and a redheaded inmate, referred to as "Red" in the article, told Salazar that he liked his shoes and wanted to trade. Salazar refused and Red yelled indecencies at him.

The inmates were rushed to finish eating, so Salazar gobbled down his food and witnessed something else in the jail — drugs. Red had taken two red capsules from a tissue and drank them with coffee after eating. "Then a small brown paper bag was passed to him, coming quickly from the direction of the food servers, and he immediately took the bag and dropped it down a convenient hole to his cell downstairs," Salazar wrote.

Salazar was later called to Red's cell where he threatened the newcomer. Red grabbed him by the collar and said, "See these hands? They can beat you up or kill you and no one here will say anything about it." Salazar went back to his bunk where lice began to crawl over him, but all he could do was lie still. Minutes later, Red and his gang started acting funny and began to wail. Then they started to "sing" at the top of their lungs. "It sounded more like the writhing of sinners from hell you read about," said Salazar.

The night went on slowly, and Salazar explained that neither he nor the other inmates could sleep because of the lice crawling on them and the noise from the "hopheads," a term in familiar use from the 1920s or 1930s through the 1950s for drug addict. It was not until morning that the noise abated and Salazar decided he wanted to leave. He could no longer continue with the experiment and called his newspaper to bail him out. The journalist left distraught by his experience and barefoot, according to Flynn.

After the *El Paso Herald-Post* article, El Paso city officials set out to clean the jail and stop contraband in the cells. After a few days, Salazar found the cells clean and in better condition. The individuals that were part of smuggling narcotics were sentenced to jail. Salazar had not only succeeded in exposing jail conditions about which the community was ignorant, but his investigative reporting also spurred action by city officials.

Guerrero mentioned in her interview that this one was of her most memorable memories of Salazar: writing stories nobody else had ever attempted to write. "There was discrimination in the 50s and no one ever talked about it. We just took it as part of our life. No one never ever protested, demonstrated or complained about sometimes blatant racism towards people of color," said Guerrero. Salazar wanted to experience the stories he was writing about and share them with his reading public. Guerrero added that people began reading his stories, eager to learn what else what going on in their community now that there was a journalist revealing the truth.

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As he was beginning to be more involved in investigative writing, Salazar found another way of uncovering the drug situation. Ignacia Jasso González, also known as "La Nacha," had supplied drugs to Juárez, El Paso and other cities for more than 50 years. From the 1920s to the 1970s, "La Nacha" was the first major drug dealer in Juárez, according to Howard Campbell in his book *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez.*

La Nacha at one point lived in El Paso, recalled El Paso historian Fred Morales in Campbell's book. Morales said that he lived in the same apartment complex as La Nacha before she moved to Juárez in a house on Violetas and Bellavista Street, where Salazar visited her in the 1950s. In his Aug. 17, 1955 article "La Nacha Sells Dirty Dope at $5 a 'Papel'; Herald-Post Reporter Makes Purchase from Border 'Queen,'" Salazar described the day he purchased narcotics in Juárez.

Ruben Salazar honored on 2008 U.S. postage stamp ***(File image)***

Salazar asked a drug or dope addict, referred to as "Hypo," to take him to buy heroin. "Hypo, who says he wants to quit, cannot live without heroin," wrote Salazar. Hypo had sold all his furniture to buy heroin and had even been evicted from his apartment for not paying rent. He had stolen and borrowed for this drug and gave Salazar the story for $15.

Salazar described La Nacha's house as the most decent one in the Bellavista neighborhood; the rest were adobe houses on an unpaved road. The yellow house with fancy iron grillwork on the windows was also filled with modern appliances and furniture. When the men reached the house, Hypo did not knock since he knew La Nacha so well. When meeting with the "Queen," Hypo told her Salazar was a musician wanting to buy a "load." She looked at Salazar's arms and Hypo explained that Salazar was not a "mainliner," that is, he did not inject himself, only breathed in the heroin. They paid her $5 and left for a hotel. Salazar then observed the process Hypo went through mainlining heroine, from preparing the drug to his reaction after he injected it:

> *Hypo then placed the hypodermic syringe in the [bottle] cap and the brownish substance could be seen running up into the syringe. Hypo's wild eyes gleamed with excitement. Hypo crouched on the floor balanced on the front of his shoes. He injected the heroin in his vein. His vein was swollen from so many punctures. Almost as soon as the heroin had gone into his vein he started rocking back and forth. I asked him how he felt. "Muy suave, ese," he said. "Real good." Before long he passed out. ... I tried to wake him. I couldn't. So I went home.*

Later, Hypo explained to Salazar that he had overdosed and could have died because the heroin was "real clean," or pure, as opposed to the usual "dirty load." Salazar wrote that the second time the men bought a load, the substance was not as clean, or perhaps Hypo judged the amount better. He needed to be "cured" quickly, and as soon as he injected the heroin, he looked and acted better. Salazar wrote that Hypo was only "half dead" instead of three quarters. He had stopped shaking and was smoking and talking. The article ended by Hypo stating he wanted to quit heroin for his daughter. Salazar hoped for this as well.

Because of this article, Salazar was asked to testify in a narcotics hearing in San Antonio; his article had gotten attention. Salazar testified for 45 minutes about his experience purchasing narcotics in Juárez. Many believe Salazar's story on "La Nacha" might have affected the "dope" market in Juárez since the "Queen" dropped out of the drug trade after the article appeared. Flynn repeated a story that Salazar wanted to show how easy it was to acquire drugs in Mexico and bring them across the border, calling for tighter border inspections. He dropped a package of marijuana on the desk of editor Ed Pooley who quickly flushed the drugs down the toilet and reprimanded Salazar soundly.

Salazar also wrote about the illegal alcohol sold in "speakeasies" in South El Paso. These illicit establishments, often in apartments, sold rubbing alcohol watered down with boiling water for 10 cents a drink. His 1956 article "Speakeasies Sell 'Atomic' Booze in South El Paso" described a visit with a "bum" to a speakeasy that Salazar made after a citizen called him and asked why police did not do anything about such places. He concluded there were about 20 speakeasies in South El Paso. Residents hated them because they attracted drunks, making it hard to raise a family in such an environment and also because the police ignored these speakeasies. One man asked, "Just because we're poor down here does it mean we're not entitled to police protection?"

Salazar moved to northern California in 1956, working for the Santa Rosa *Press Democrat* and the *San Francisco News*. People wanted to hear the truth, and here was a journalist who wrote of the reality of their community. Grace Jang, writing for the Ruben Salazar Project, noted that in 1957, he wrote in the Santa Rosa paper, "Probably a newspaper's most important function is to inform. In a free country the people have a right to know and a newspaper's first duty is to give them the facts — pleasant or unpleasant."

He was offered a job by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1959 and moved south. He met Sally Robare, who had worked in the classifieds department, and the couple married on May 16, 1960. They would have three children: Lisa Marie, Stephanie Ann and John Kenneth.

When Otis Chandler became publisher of his family's newspaper in 1960, the *Los Angeles Times* began the change from a "provincial" political organ to a newspaper based on "high quality reporting and writing," according to Mario T. Garcia in his book *Ruben Salazar: Border Correspondent*. By 1963, *Time* magazine included the *Los Angeles Times* in its list of the country's 10 best newspapers.

Between 1961 and 1965, Salazar's work focused on economic and cultural issues of the U.S.-Mexico border, especially problems in education and employment of Mexican-Americans. He also described the problems of Braceros and domestic and commuter farm hands in California. He began raising the consciousness of Mexican-Americans, forcing them to think about who they were and why they were so powerless politically and economically.

As he became more successful, Salazar came to the attention of the foreign editor of the *Los Angeles Times* who thought he would be perfect to cover the U.S. involvement in the civil war in the Dominican Republic. He was sent the same year to report on the increasing U.S. presence in Vietnam. In one story he reported on a young man from Alabama who was killed by mortar fire and then refused burial in his home town because he was black.

In 1966, Salazar was then sent to Mexico City and became Mexico City bureau chief for the *Times*. He had a particular interest in the plight of Indians in Mexico. Salazar also reported on the 1968 anti-government student demonstrations in Mexico where soldiers clashed with groups of students protesting the quality of education, the lack of jobs and the power of the ruling political party, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

In an ironic twist, Salazar's newspaper sent him a letter in June 1968 requesting his return to California to cover the "uproar" being caused by protests in the U.S. by Mexican-Americans, according to the PBS documentary *Ruben Salazar: Man in the Middle.* Massive walkouts by high school and junior high school students protesting the poor quality of education and discrimination in the school system in East Los Angeles had occurred. *Border Correspondent* author Garcia noted that there were few Mexican-American reporters on the *Los Angeles Times*, and that had made it hard for it to cover the budding Chicano Movement, now concerned with poverty, racism, police brutality, poverty and the Vietnam War. Salazar and his family returned to California.

Back home, he was involved with the Mexican-American community reporting on the students' demand to be able to speak Spanish on school grounds,

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and to be able to be part of American culture, not outside of it. The fight for civil rights was being waged all over the country by African Americans, by Chicanos, by farm workers, by women. It was a difficult period in the nation when individuals joined separate groups united in the common cause of equality — peacefully, if possible, violently, if necessary. It was the time of the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, militant groups of African-Americans and Mexican-Americans, and Cesar Chavez, non-violent leader of Mexican farm workers.

In one of his articles, Salazar quoted Brown Beret leader David Sanchez, "To the Anglo, justice means just us." Salazar provided his readers with factual information on the protests and their leaders, as well as revealing prejudice by judicial, educational and political leaders and exposing stereotypes of Mexican-Americans by the media. He was asked to tone down his rhetoric. This was about the same time he decided to leave the *Los Angeles Times* to go on television.

Salazar resigned from the *Times* in January 1970. He had taken the position as news director of Channel 34 KMEX, Los Angeles' first Spanish-language television station, However, he continued to write a column for the *Times* about Chicano issues.

Both in his column and at KMEX Salazar reported on apparent police brutality and abuse. Garcia wrote that he was being investigated by the FBI and that the Los Angeles Police Department labeled him a "slanted, left-wing oriented reporter." Spanish-speaking reporters had clashed with police several times while trying to film school walkouts after seeing police drag girls by the hair and being banned from the site because they had the "wrong" press credentials. City Editor Bill Thomas of the *Times* recalled that Los Angeles "Police Chief Ed Davis once called on [him] to fire Salazar and abolish his column," according to Garcia. Salazar expressed to colleagues that he felt he was being followed by the police.

On July 16, 1970, two brothers who were Mexican Nationals were killed by Los Angeles police during a hunt for a robbery suspect. Salazar interviewed three people wounded in the shooting, according to the PBS documentary. After the interviews and an article by the *Times*, the policemen were indicted for their brutality.

On Aug. 29, 1970, the Chicano Moratorium was held in Laguna Park in East Los Angeles. Randy Ontiveros stated in *No Golden Age: Television News and the Chicano Civil Movement* that the protest, launched by 25,000 Chicanos protesting the Vietnam War and the disproportionate number of Mexican-Americans being killed, was meant to be peaceful. After a scuffle with suspected looters, the police engaged the protesters violently and arrested about 150 people. According to Ontiveros, at least 60 people were injured and three were killed, including Salazar.

Salazar and others had been taking a break from the protest by heading to the Silver Dollar Café, many blocks from the park. Shortly after, Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriff Sergeant Thomas Wilson shot a 10-by-1½ inch tear gas projectile in the doorway of the café. A rumor that several men with weapons had entered the café later proved to be false. The tear gas canister hit Salazar in the head and he died instantly.

Mural on column at Lincoln Park in El Paso by a group of Canutillo High School students, supervised by Carlos Callejo ***(Photo by Migdalia Howell)***

Whether Salazar's death was a homicide or an accident has never been determined. A coroner's inquest took place and after several days of testimony, no charges were filed against the sheriff's deputy. In a 1973 *Times* article by Ray Zeman and Dave Smith, Los Angeles Supervisor Kenneth Hahn said that the tear gas projectile "was not authorized for use in the type of situation in which Salazar was killed."

Zeman and Smith wrote that after Salazar and her children brought suit against the Sherrif's Department, the Salazar family was granted $700,000 in 1973 by Judge Alfred J. McCourtney, who added in a *Los Angeles Times* article that the award did not suggest the police were guilty of misconduct. Even after the records of the shooting were released to the public in 2011, the Office of Independent Review, a civilian agency, could "assign no blame or wrongdoing." However, many still believe that Salazar was a target.

People from all segments of society attended Salazar's funeral, and his death impacted people locally as well as in California and elsewhere. On the day of his death, Rosa Guerrero called Salazar's mother, who invited Guerrero to a mass at Sacred Heart Church. After the mass, about 50 of Salazar's colleagues and friend gathered for a meeting, a big turning point in her life. Guerrero was the only woman there and had never been involved in a community awareness Chicano group. It was the beginning of her activism. She became one of the founders of the Ruben Salazar Foundation Scholarship Fund for Latinos.

Salazar became a martyr to Chicano activists and an icon to young Hispanic journalism students and remains so. Salazar posthumously received the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award in 1971, and in 1999 the California Chicano News Media Association created the Ruben Salazar Journalism Awards, honoring excellence in published or broadcast work that promotes understanding of Latinos. The city of Los Angeles renamed Laguna Park the Ruben Salazar Park.

In addition, several other schools, streets, buildings and programs across the country were named after him, such as the Ruben Salazar High School in Pico Rivera, Calif., the Ruben Salazar Bilingual Center in Chicago and the Ruben Salazar Hall at California State University. Additionally, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) established a scholarship in honor of Salazar. The U.S. Postal Service also released a stamp in honor of Salazar on April 22, 2008. He is the first Hispanic journalist on a U.S. postage stamp.

In El Paso, a mural at Lincoln Park commemorates the journalist and his impact, and another mural honors him at an apartment complex named for him on Eucalyptus Street. To honor the trailblazer, the UTEP Department of Communication created the Ruben Salazar Spanish-Language Media Program in 2003, according to Kimberly Miller in a University Communications article. The program strives to educate bilingual journalists by providing them the best resources. UTEP named him their Distinguished Alumnus in 2008, and he was honored as one of the Writers of the Pass of the North in the 2012 Carl Hertzog Lecture Series.

The PBS documentary by Phillip Rodriguez entitled *Ruben Salazar: Man in the Middle* was shown in El Paso in honor of Salazar's accomplishments. The documentary aired nationally on April 29, 2014.

Salazar was truly a man in the middle, a Mexican who became an American and married an Anglo woman. He served in the U.S. Army but admitted it was a mistake for the U.S. to fight in Vietnam. He championed rights for all Mexican-Americans, rights that he enjoyed, and in the last few years of his life began trying to explain the term "Chicano" to his reading audience. He did not intentionally die for a cause but felt he was a target of investigation. Today he is honored by his former peers as well as the newer generations for his journalism and his ethics. Although his name is celebrated in parks, schools, murals and programs, many Americans have yet to learn about him. To those who remember him, Ruben Salazar will always be the one who valued justice, fairness and, above all, truth.