

Felipe Rivas History

by Belen Rivas Olson



Hilda Nachtigal, Paul Rivas, Belen Rivas, Agnetha Duerksen, Waldeck Grade School, 1930

My grandfather, Felipe Rivas, was born in 1861 to Antonio Rivas and Damiana Salvera Rivas in a little village known as the Hacienda de Pedricena in the state of Durango, Mexico. The Hacienda Pedricena Lerdo and Gomez Palacio are a few of the villages nearest the larger city Torreon, in the neighboring state of Coahuila. Some of the industries of the area include farming, grazing, mining, and some of the land in this area was irrigated for wheat and cotton. From what I observed in my younger day, there was more cotton than wheat produced in the area. Haciendas are large landed estates that had begun to grow as early as the 16th century.

Growing up at the Hacienda Pedricena, Grandfather Felipe lived a normal childhood, grew to manhood, and met and married Alejandra Vaquera when he was 37 years old and she was 17. He was born during the "Reform Era" 1858-1861 when Britain, France, and Spain were trying to gain control and rule Mexico. Of course, after many bloody battles, we know these countries were defeated in their efforts. But young Felipe lived to see one president (Perfirio Diaz) run the country with a ruthless army for 33 years. He saw the years of civil war, and in general witnessed much suffering among the peasants and workers trying to make a decent living in their respective areas of the country. Hacienda life was simple, with farming and ranching being the principal means of making a living.

The railroad era in the United States had opened up in earnest during the 1850's. By the time Felipe had reached an insight of changing his life from what he was doing to something better, he became aware of future opportunities for himself and his family. The United States had opened its doors to workers from any country to come and help build and work on the railroads in the United States.

Although I came to personally know my Grandmother, Alejandra, I never had the fortune of knowing my grandfather, Felipe. How he came

to choose Kansas as his place to work for a railroad company in the United States, I never knew. But during the years of his youth, there was iron ore, copper, and silver mining done in the area of his birthplace. It was said that men from the United States went there to work in the mines. It could be that this is where Grandfather Felipe got wind of the railroads being built in the U.S.

Grandfather Felipe applied for entrance into the U.S. through the port of El Paso, Texas, on November 15, 1918, with passport number 15775, traveling with his wife, Alejandra Vaquera de Rivas, and sons Antonio, Jose, and Alfredo Rivas. Permission was granted. He came directly from Hacienda Pedricena, Durango, Mexico, to Waldeck, Kansas, to work for the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad Company headquartered out of Chicago, Illinois. Mr. A. J. Trent was his supervisor. Felipe and his eldest son, Antonio, 19 years of age, worked together on the Section Gang while his wife Alejandra, and sons Jose and Alfredo, held down the home front. Alfredo and Jose were too young to work for the railroad.

According to Mr. Stephen Schmidt's report of 2009 (History of Waldeck Schools in Marion County, Kansas) where he researched the existence of Waldeck, Kansas, he mentions "the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railroad was built in 1887"...a siding on the railroad was established in the north half of Section 4 and given the name of Waldeck. This railroad later became known as "The Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad."

All went well for Felipe and his family in Waldeck, Kansas, for almost three years. One day Felipe was severely injured on the job when a rail fell on one of his feet. This caused serious problems and due to lack of proper medical attention, gangrene set in on the injured foot and Felipe knew it was bad news. After serious thought, he decided to return to his birthplace to bear the pain and the end. The entire family returned to Hacienda Pedricena with Felipe where he died on May 8, 1921.

After the death of Grandfather Felipe, Grandmother Alejandra decided to return to the U.S. where her son Antonio had a job. Alejandra Vaquera de Rivas applied for entrance into the U.S. on June 3, 1921, accompanied by sons Antonio, Jose, and Alfredo Rivas. Her destination was Waldeck, Kansas, with Robert J. Trent, Section Foreman of the Waldeck CRIP siding being her contact person. Permission was granted

to Alejandra on July 26, 1921.

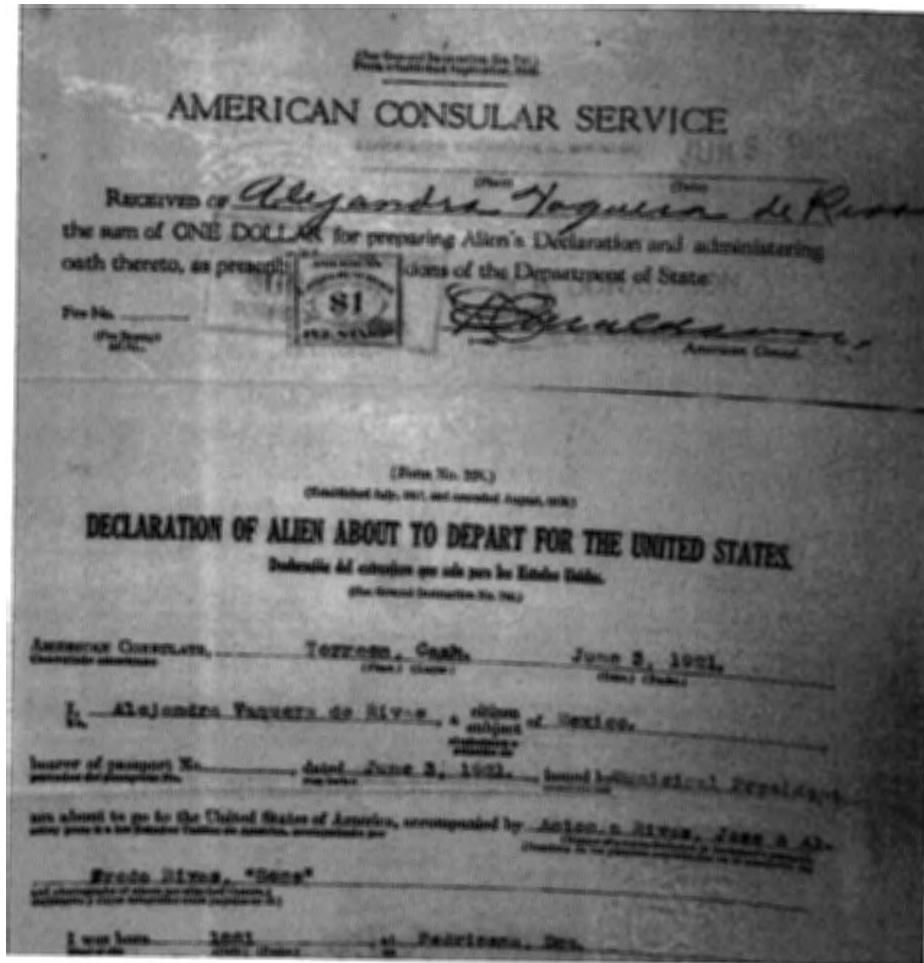
My father, Antonio, worked at the Waldeck siding while his mother (my grandmother) Alejandra held down the home front. Since Jose and Alfredo were too young to work, their mother decided to enroll them in a little country school nearby (about a mile) known as the Waldeck Grade School. Their names appear in the School Census of District No. 102 and 103 Marion County, Kansas, for the year ending June 30, 1923. Other names appearing on this Census were the Rogers children, Bernice, Frances, and Neal, who lived at the Waldeck site. Their father, Bert Rogers, was now the Section Foreman of the Waldeck siding.

My father, Antonio Rivas, eldest of three boys in this "Kansas Adventure" was born on the Hacienda Pedricena, state of Durango, Mexico, on November 18, 1899 (the same Hacienda that Grandfather Felipe had been born). As mentioned previously, Antonio came to Kansas with his parents and brothers in 1918, returned to Mexico in 1921 with the family to bury his father, then returned to Waldeck, Kansas to resume his work in Waldeck in 1921.

Up to this point the three Rivas boys were eligible bachelors. Antonio decided to take time off, returned to his home town, and asked for Maria Perez's hand in marriage. They were married on January 14, 1922, returned to Waldeck on their honeymoon, and he resumed his job with CRIP. Maria gave birth to their first-born on November 13, 1922, at Waldeck, Kansas, with the help of a midwife, the nearest doctor being in Canton, Kansas. (Maria's means of transportation for the first doctor's check-up was on the Section's motor car... they traveled from Waldeck to Canton, KS.)

Antonio and his family traveled to their home town in Hacienda Pedricena once a year but by 1924 Jose and Alfredo had been offered jobs on the CRIP and Alejandra and the boys stayed in Kansas while Antonio and family traveled home on the yearly jaunt. Antonio and Maria's first daughter (Belen) was born on one of their first trips home in 1924, and their second son (Daniel) was born in 1926. Their fourth child, a daughter (Esther Mary) was born in 1928 in Waldeck, Kansas. Antonio and Maria now had a family of two boys and two girls.

As was mentioned previously, Jose and Alfredo were offered jobs at the Waldeck siding in 1924 and the boys, all three of them, made



Alejandra Rivas Passport 1921

railroading their life's occupation working on up to being section foremen at various points on the CRIP line.

Alejandra remained with her family at Waldeck, experiencing the ups and downs of living in the new frontier with her sons and four grandchildren. She suffered complications from an abscessed tooth and passed away on August 8, 1928. She is buried in the Canton, KS cemetery. My father's entire working career was railroading as was my uncle Joe's and Uncle Alfredo's. After retirement, my father Antonio lived the rest of his life in McPherson, Kansas, and died on September 5, 1976. He is buried in the McPherson, Kansas, cemetery.

After working in Waldeck, Kansas, my uncle Alfredo moved to McPherson in 1931 as a Section Hand then became a machine operator at the McPherson site in 1950. He became Section Foreman in 1972 at McPherson and retired on January 30, 1974, after 50 years of railroading. Alfredo married Jewell Cox on December 31, 1941; they moved to Hutchinson, Kansas in 1974. Jewell died in 1985.

The three Rivas boys each played an instrument. Alfredo played violin and accordion, Jose played violin, and my father Antonio played guitar. They were self-taught and had a life-long love of music. I heard them play together on several occasions while growing up.

Alfredo died on November 28, 1999 at the age of 91 years and is buried in the McPherson, Kansas, cemetery. Uncle Jose moved to California after living most of his life in McPherson and that's where he died in the presence of his family on April 10, 1982, and is buried in Los Angeles, California.

While in Waldeck, Kansas, Antonio and Maria's first two children, Paul D. and Belen, now ages 7 and 6 respectively in 1930, were enrolled in the Waldeck Grade School located about three miles northwest of Lehigh, Kansas... According to Mr. Stephen Schmidt this would be "at present day 240th and Chisholm Trail roads" and "the school had been in existence since 1889." This was the same school that my uncle Jose and Alfredo Rivas had attended in 1923.

My brother Paul and I walked to school every day about a mile on a country dirt road. Our teachers, Hilda Nachtigal and Agnetha Duerksen, eagerly awaited our arrival each day as neither Paul nor I could speak English. However, we were soon taught to speak, read, and write under

the excellent tutelage of these caring and dedicated teachers. On cold, rainy, or snowy days, a very nice farmer, Mr. Ewert, driving a horse and buggy, would stop along the road to pick us up and transport us to school. Mr. Ewert's daughter, Elvira, was in the upper grades at the Waldeck School. We became long-time and fast friends.

During first grade, I learned to speak, read, and write with such vigor, intensity, and enthusiasm that Miss Agnetha Duerksen had the courage to enter me in the annual spelling bee for the 1930-31 school year at Marion, Kansas. I had the honor of winning first place on this occasion. There couldn't have been a happier teacher in the entire state of Kansas than Miss Agnetha Duerksen! Brother Paul did not enter the contest, but he, too, was happy about all the "goings on" of the day. I myself knew that something good had happened but I was not quite sure of what it was. For me, it was just another day of school except at a different location. The teachers personally took us home that day to congratulate my parents. The teachers were thanked for bringing us home that day and for bringing the good news, although at the time, my parents were not sure either of what exactly had taken place but they knew it was something good. Many years later in a memorabilia box I found the ribbon and the letter showing that I had won a first place prize!

Other memories of Waldeck School were the recess times when the girls played "house" with make-believe toys and dolls; they used me as a live baby sister. I was so small in stature they actually took turns carrying me around in their arms. I wanted to go outside to see what the boys were doing, but I didn't get the chance.

Another incident was when my brother decided to take a different route to school. He was the adventuresome kind of brother. One day on the way to school, he cut across a corn field to make the trip shorter. The corn was way over my head and I started to cry, it seemed like a jungle! But my brother said, "Don't cry, we're almost there! Look, we can see the school from here!" Sure enough, the jungle ended and we made it to school in good time.

During the mid-year of 1931, my father was transferred to his next assignment on the CRIP to Mullinville, Kansas. My brother Paul and I began the 2nd grade in Mullinville during the 1931-32 school year while my young brother Danny began his first grade. Our youngest sibling in the

family, Esther, began her first year of school there in Mullinville during the 1934-35 school year. Mullinville was a small farming community in Kiowa Country and here our family experienced the historic Dust Bowl days and a taste of the Great Depression days. However, for our family, we got along as well as anybody... we were never hungry, there was always food on the table, and I cannot once remember my father ever missing a day of work. We lived in Mullinville for several years. The experience of being dismissed from school when a dust storm was "coming through" and our mother and rest of the family helping put up wet sheets to the windows and doors to help keep out some of the dust was unforgettable!

In February of 1938, the family was moved to McPherson, Kansas where my father had been transferred. My brother Paul and I completed our last three months of the 1937-38 school year at the Park School, 210 N. Elm Street, McPherson, Kansas. Brother Danny and our youngest sibling Esther continued their schooling in the various schools in McPherson beginning in the Roosevelt Grade School on up. Brother Paul and I were together all through High School except when Paul left during the middle of his junior year to give Uncle Sam a helping hand during World War II. He was presented with his high school diploma in a special ceremony "Operation Recognition" program for veterans of WWII who joined the military before graduating from high school. There were several school board members present at this ceremony along with Bob Shannon, superintendent of USD 418, and Lew Faust, McPherson High School principal, who presented the diploma.

Upon graduating from McPherson Senior High School in May of 1944, Danny reported for active duty in World War II on October 19, 1944, serving in the Asiatic Pacific Theater (Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Tokyo, Kanagawa "Military District" Yokahama) until November 21, 1946.

After returning from the war, Danny married Nona Grant. They had two daughters, Dana and Dawn. His work was in the life insurance business and retail business, among other things, until his retirement. He has continued to live in McPherson using his retirement years volunteering in community service with dedicated emphasis as coordinator for the Veteran of Foreign Wars Firing Squad, of which

he has been a member for more than 60 years. This volunteer service includes the conducting of military funerals honoring deceased veterans of the Armed Forces. At age 85 now, he is slowing down on some of this work but it still as active as he can be in the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion organizations here in McPherson which he joined immediately after he left the Service in 1946.

My young sister, Esther, married and lived her life in McPherson with husband Myron J. Lingle and their four children, Larry, Michael, Debbie, and Toni, until her death due to cancer at the age of 36 years. She died on July 31, 1965, and is buried in McPherson, Kansas. She is my daughter's namesake.

After graduating from McPherson Senior High School in 1942, I attended one year at McPherson College. However, I felt like an NBA drafted sports player when a local business man asked me to work for him at one of the local refineries. At the time, there were two refineries in McPherson. I did not show any interest whatsoever and used the excuse that I had no experience. The kind gentleman told me to think about it. He had researched my skills as a typist and the fact that I took shorthand at 120 words per minute didn't hurt anything either.

After considering the pros and cons of the situation confronting me, and after refusing the offer three times, I had finally come to grips with the matter at hand. After much prayerful thought and careful consideration, I finally decided to give it a try with the thought in mind that I could always go back to college if things did not work out.

As it turned out, I worked as secretary to the Executive Vice President and General Manager of the National Cooperative Refinery Association at the age 20 years old. I still have his business card with his credentials and phone number. I continued in this position for eighteen years. As a matter of fact, I ended up working for three executive vice presidents and general managers during these eighteen years and the experience was invaluable!

Not only were these my "growing up" years but they were also years of polishing and "tuning up" the talents the Lord had given me to serve the people who came into my life. The skills I developed at becoming a good secretary became my trademark and they were enhanced so very much by the gift the Lord had given me of being bilingual. This became



Belen Olson, March 2012

an asset to the company when I could receive and serve as hostess to foreign visitors who came occasionally from overseas to visit an American cooperative refinery. Sitting in on company litigation sessions was also an exciting venture of this position. PR responsibilities were a top priority. I met my husband, Clyde Olson, here and was married in 1961, and retired to raise my family in 1962. We were very fortunate to have two children (one of each gender) because we were “no spring chickens” when we got married. So might I ask, “Were we not very much blessed?”

The greatest event (besides getting married and giving birth to Richard and Esther Maria) was becoming a citizen of these United States of America in 1949. My father became a citizen in 1947 for which he was very grateful and proud. I, too, am very proud and thankful to have been raised a true Kansan and to live in one of these beautiful States of America.

The positions I have held during my tenure in the business world have all come to me. I have never applied for a job. After I retired to raise my family, other jobs came to me when various businesses needed my assistance in emergency circumstances, which I would always accept because they were to be “short-term.” The one I thought would be the shortest term lasted thirteen years! We have lived in McPherson, Kansas, since 1938 and I myself feel as though I am a “permanent fixture” in the community. I am happy with my husband of 51 years, we’ve been retired for a number of years, and did much traveling in our younger day, and our two cultures have been more than educational and interesting! We are proud of our children, Richard and Esther Maria, who received their education in Kansas colleges, and are successful and happy in their present positions in life. I am also proud of my brothers, Paul and Danny, who served our Country at a time when Uncle Sam needed them; they helped to make history!

There are many little “side stories” that I could tell with each of the stories I have related here, but time will not permit to expound on these at this writing. I hope when my “life story book” is written, more will be included therein. I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was placed on this spot on the face of the Earth for a purpose and that I have

had a mission to accomplish. It isn’t quite finished yet... but one day it will be! You may refer to this as the Felipe Rivas & Waldeck Story... FELIPE started it all! I’m smiling because it happened!