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BY SUSAN SHUMAKER

JUAN LUJAN AND THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS  
BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

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*Early Life*

Juan Roberto Lujan was born on May 16, 1922, the last child of José and Jesusita Nieto Lujan. He was born in Redford, Texas—a tiny West Texas farming community 215 miles southeast of El Paso on the banks of the Rio Grande. Founded in the mid-1870s, the community was initially called El Polvo, named for a 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Mission on the site. The Franciscans had called the place San Jose Del Polvo—“St. Joseph of the Dust” (Shumaker; Paulsen).

Juan’s father died in 1934, leaving behind a wife, two sons, and two daughters. Their small farm, planted with cotton, did not provide sufficient income for the family to live, with cotton prices plummeting each year, and with just sixty residents and three businesses in town, there were few prospects for other employment. The family soon moved to Marfa, the Presidio County seat 75 miles to the north, to be closer to Juan’s brother, Frank. Eleven years Juan’s senior, Frank was enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), working on the Indian Lodge at Davis Mountains State Park, just north of Marfa in Fort Davis (Odintz; Duncan 2; “Marfa;” Shumaker; Baucom).

My father was so afraid that [my brother] was in the Army, so he had to go visit. He became convinced that it was all right; he liked it. My father, as a farmer, was a jack-of-all-trades. He was sortof a carpenter also. He found out that my brother was studying and practicing carpentry [in the CCC], but he discovered something that he had never seen: blueprints. . . . To him, that was something marvelous. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 4)

Later, Frank moved to California as a migrant worker, sending a portion of the money he made home to his mother and family in Marfa (Baucom).

After his junior year in High School, Juan joined his elder brother in California, working in the sugar beet fields. There he learned lessons not taught in the public school.

I always say, “I missed a year of schooling, not a year of education!” That year was an eye-opener and taught me very clearly what I did *not* want to do. I learned it was important to finish school. —Juan Lujan (Shumaker)

*NP1T*

In Marfa, Juan lived with his mother and an older sister, Consuelo. His mother did not work, nor did Consuelo, who suffered from a mild case of polio, making it difficult for her to walk. With no income beyond the small contributions from Frank, the only way the family could survive was with assistance from the state (Shumaker).

Welfare at that time was called “relief.” And, in addition to providing . . . foods . . . — they were called surplus foods that the government was buying and then distributing — . . . my mother was also receiving a welfare check from the county. And it was sad when I found out the source of that money. It was from the pauper’s fund. So that was hard to take. But, hey, it kept us going, because my goal and my mother’s goal was that I continue high school. I had interrupted one year to go to California as a migrant worker, follow the crops, but when I came back, this I knew: I had to continue. —Juan Lujan (Duncan 3)

Juan graduated from High School in 1940, the midst of the Great Depression.

I had no hope of going to college. I couldn’t even consider it. I was just anxious to graduate from high school so that I could start working. —Juan Lujan (Shumaker)

There were few jobs in Marfa at the time and Juan had limited prospects for work. A woman from the welfare office spoke with Juan and his mother about an opportunity that might not only mean work, but the prospect of continuing his education.

What is now called a caseworker said that there was an opportunity to go to . . . a CCC camp. She didn’t know much, but she knew that for somebody who was in Marfa where there were no jobs, at least this was a job. She said there are educational opportunities. She didn’t explain, but later I found out that, yes, there were educational opportunities. I graduated from high school around—in fact, my birthday—the middle of May. Within about two weeks, I was on my way to Chisos Mountains where they were developing the Big Bend National Park. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 2)

Juan was sent to camp number “NP1T”—National Park No. 1 for Texas—in the Chisos Mountains, soon to become Big Bend National Park.

One of the camp trucks picked us up. They picked some [boys] up at Marfa, then they picked some up at Alpine. There were some from Fort Davis waiting to be picked up. . . . I really didn’t know [what to expect]. I found out that there were barracks and that we were going to sleep there, live there. That was home. . . . We were going to be living military style. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 3-4)

Rules and routines in the camp mimicked army life, as well.

We’d get up in the morning very early—to me it was very early; I don’t really know how early it was—but it was early enough so that we’d have time for calisthenics. We’d march out; do calisthenics... Then we could go to the showers and [get dressed according to] our jobs. We went to breakfast. Then the various trucks operated by the National Park Service were there to pick up their crews to take them [to their work]. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 8)

### *Camp Work*

Shortly after his arrival, Juan was assigned a job building cabins.

Somebody had already poured the foundations. This was a time when the placement of the walls, stones and whatnot, was coming up. The instructor that was teaching us about plans— The measurements were given in feet and tenths of feet. I was surprised it was not in inches. He gave us a little exercise: this much and this many tenths—how much is that? I figured it out right quickly. I sort of became an informal leader right there. There were very few that were high school graduates, and in that group, I think I was the only one. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 5)

Juan worked as a “straw boss” on the buildings, directing men and interpreting NPS blueprints, for only about a month before being transferred to a new position: interpretive guide at a small on-site museum. Juan speculates that he was hired for the position because of his ability to converse fluently in Spanish and English—and, he laughs, his “good looks.” Each day, he would take visitors through the exhibits of dinosaur bones and various Indian artifacts and remains, all discovered nearby. For this work, Juan was paid the same as all other CCC workers in the park.

We got paid \$30.00 a month, of which a whole \$5.00 was ours. The rest of it went home. And \$25.00 a month [might seem] like nothing, but it made a big difference. —Juan Lujan (Duncan 3)

#### *Opportunities and Lasting Effects*

In November 1940, after working in the museum for only a few months, Juan learned of an opportunity that would change his life forever.

Some time in November there was a memo out of Fort Bliss that there was an opportunity for . . . attending college. If anybody who was a high school graduate was interested in a transfer, they were accepting applications. I submitted an application. I was accepted. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 13)

Juan was transferred to a camp in Las Cruces, NM, so he could attend New Mexico State University while continuing to serve in the corps. He was placed on the “gopher crew”—eradicating gophers and their tunnels—for the Leasburg Dam on the Rio Grande (Shumaker).

The gopher crew had an irregular schedule. We had long hours on certain days so that on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday we could have [time off for taking classes]. The other days, including Saturday, were full days, like nine or ten hours, so that at the end of the week we had put in our regular forty hours. So they were not giving us any slack there, except to rearrange the schedule. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 14)

As a result of his work in the camp, Juan was able to pay in-state tuition at the college, making it possible for him to attend. He was enrolled part time at New Mexico State from January of 1941 through the spring semester of 1942, when work ended at the camp. Juan then returned to Marfa. He was drafted into the Army Air Force that November and, after six months in radio school, served in Europe during World War II. “When I joined the Army,” Juan later said, “it was no big transition. I had already had the CCC experience!” (Wirt 17–20; 23–24).

His time at New Mexico State had instilled in Juan a desire to finish college. When he returned from Europe in July of 1945, and with the help of the GI Bill, he was able to do that and more.

[The CCC] initiated my college education, which, because of my economic situation, was sort of considered impossible. . . . By the time [I returned from the war], I had applied to attend the University of Texas. From San Antonio, instead of going straight home, I went to Austin to check on my application. The registrar had a [big] stack of applications . . . Guess where mine was? At the top. It had just arrived there. Somebody out there was taking care of me. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 21–22)

Ultimately, Juan received not only a bachelor's degree but a master's and, in time, a doctorate, as well.

When I got my doctorate, a friend of mine who was part of the gopher crew—he was from Wichita Falls—he figured I needed something special. He gave me a name tag [bearing] a Latin inscription that loosely translated means: “Behold he who used to kill gophers. His odyssey is hereby ended.” —Juan Lujan (Wirt 22)

No less important than his education was the feeling of financial independence that his participation in the program provided for himself and his family back in Marfa. As soon as he got his first payment from the CCC, Juan wrote to the County Seat and had the family name removed from the rolls of the Pauper's Fund (Shumaker).

Money and dignity were important because whenever you need a shirt and you buy it—if you bought it with your own money, hey, that's a good feeling, as opposed to having somebody give it to you. And generally if they gave it to you, it would be a hand-me-down. Which was all right, also, but [being able to] buy one [yourself] was very important. —Juan Lujan (Duncan 5)

Juan taught public school and worked in the Texas educational system for nearly forty years. He takes special pride in his work with less privileged children, running the state's second-largest Headstart program and launching a successful initiative helping underrepresented students go to college. He credits his stint in the Civilian Conservation Corps as the beginning of a successful life and feels passionately about the program's impact on our nation, both physically and psychologically (Shumaker).

We have traveled many parts of the country. Talk about footprints! Everywhere we go, we see things that were made by the CCC. When they made something, it stayed there—whether it was a road, or a camp, or whatever.

[Someone] said that the CCC was one of the best things to happen to the country. He was right. There have been many times, in very recent times, when something like that has been needed, needed badly. . . . To me—it kept my family eating, got me started in my education, prepared me for Army life. . . . I've always wondered why something this good has not been repeated. —Juan Lujan (Wirt 23)

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