

Los Angeles Reader
August 28, 1981

The Life and Curious Death of Rubén Salazar

And, eleven years after the Chicano journalist died while covering a protest march, things are still curious:

- **Why did the FBI track him for three years?**
- **Why did the FBI release only seventy Salazar documents from its files, while blacking out more than two hundred?**
- **Whose community is being harmed by a withholding of the truth?**

By Steve Weingarten

The journalist lies dead on the floor of a cheap East Los Angeles beer bar. The tavern's air is heavy with Southern California smog that mixes with the clouds of tear gas to burn the eyes. Outside, on one of the year's hottest days, clusters of Deputy Sheriff's squint in the afternoon sunlight to eye the crowds of Latino onlookers on Whittier Boulevard.

The street is a patchwork of broken glass, scattered rocks and bottles, and overturned cars. Several storefronts are charred. A large march to protest alleged racial injustice in the conduct of the Viet Nam war has been met with a bone-crunching attack by squads of riot-equipped law-enforcement officers. Two other men have been wounded in the confrontation near the bar and will die within a few days. Rioting will occur on this street and on the streets of nearby cities for weeks.

The day is August 29, 1970 – eleven years ago tomorrow.

The man on the floor – lying alongside the bar in the Silver Dollar Café, his face in a pool of blood, a three-and-a-quarter by two-and-a-half-inch hole in his temple- is no ordinary journalist. Born in a Mexican border town, reporter for papers in Texas and California, foreign correspondent and columnist for the Los

Angeles Times, and news director for KMEX-TV, Ruben Salazar was – and remains – an idol of Chicano youth.

For several months after his death, controversy raged: Was the death an accident, or, as many thought, was it a police assassination of one of the Chicano community's best-known spokesmen? An inquest settled the issue for some, but for others Salazar's life and the odd circumstance of his death remain the subjects of speculation even now.

A year ago, in an effort to resolve my own doubts, I took steps to obtain whatever documents the Federal Bureau of Investigation might have on Salazar. Frankly I didn't expect my request, through the Freedom of Information Act, to lead very far. However, the FBI has extensive records and has reluctantly released seventy documents from a dossier, previously unknown to the public, that indicate the FBI maintained files on Salazar at least as far back as 1967.

What the FBI didn't release may be even more significant. The agency refused to declassify 226 other documents from the Salazar file, for reasons of national security and to protect the identity of informants. In particular, the FBI has withheld information about its interest in Salazar from November 1968, when he came back to Los Angeles after a stint as the Time's Mexico City correspondent, until the day of his death not quite two year later.

From mid-1967 through late 1968, Salazar's work as a correspondent took him from the Rio Grande to the Panama Canal, and, of special interest apparently to the FBI, he made three trips into Castro's Cuba.

Indeed, the released documents show that FBI agents in Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., were involved in what appears to be a search for State Department authorization for Salazar's visits to revolutionary Cuba. Each investigation lasted months. After each investigation, the agency concluded that Salazar merited no further attention.

If finding government approval was the FBI's goal, and then the twenty-three documents concerning those respective searches are a monument to the agency's incompetence. All three trips were known about in advance by the passport official at the time in the American Embassy in Mexico City.

One phone call could have cleared matters on that account. Instead, FBI agents pursued a circuitous route through the California Department of Motor Vehicles, the State Department, the Times personnel office, and, possibly, other sources.

Sally Salazar still welcomes any news about her dead husband, and avidly reads the recently released, fourteen-year-old documents that I spread out on the coffee table in her Orange County home's living room. Sharing space with the FBI reports are a cut crystal decanter and a set of glasses, a memento the journalist hand-carried back from one of his trips to Cuba.

To answer some of my questions about the newsman's travels, Sally Salazar goes to another room and returns with her husband's now-expired U.S. passport. It bears number F253220 and was issued on May 11, 1965, in Los Angeles, just before Salazar made a six-week trip to the Dominican Republic.

But, more to the point, the accordion like pages in the back of the leather-bound document contained official visa stamps authorizing travel to Havana. Salazar's July 28, 1967, trip was authorized by the Cubans on July 24 and by the Americans the next day. He returned to Mexico City on August 14, the date after he filed his last story on the first conference of something called the Latin American Solidarity Organization.

His second trip to Cuba was on New Year's Day, 1968, and was authorized by Havana on December 27, 1967. The American Embassy in Mexico City gave visa authorization on December 29. The reporter returned to Mexico on February 2, 1968.

Salazar's third trip was to be his last. That visit took place from July 19, 1968, to August 2, 1968. Authorization was given on July 8 by the Americans and on July 19 by the Cubans.

A fourth trip was authorized by the American Embassy on September 9, 1968, but Salazar's passport offers no corresponding Cuban approval or entry and exit dates.

The FBI's conclusions, as reported in the FOI disclosure, indeed indicate that agents could find no threat to U.S. security from Salazar's Cuban trips.

"... Since no specific leads involving SALAZAR are outstanding for LA and SALAZAR remains in Mexico, it is recommended this case be closed administratively on this memorandum," concludes a March 28, 1968, document.

“... Since subject’s travel to Cuba was authorized, no additional investigation is deemed necessary at this time,” was the sign-off to a September 30, 1968, dispatch from the Mexico City FBI bureau.

“... Since the subject is a bona fide newsman, no further investigation appears necessary,” says a November 25, 1968, report, the final document concerning investigations of Salazar that the FBI has so far released.

The disclosure just confirms what Sally Salazar says she was almost sure of for a long time – that the government had been monitoring her husband. She remembers the phone calls she received in the family’s Mexico City home when Salazar was on assignment in Cuba. No phone link existed between Cuba and the United States in those days. So Salazar would call his wife to dictate his written story and she, in turn, would forward it to the *Los Angeles Times* for publication.

A bad connection made understanding Salazar’s dictation extremely difficult during one call. Sally Salazar says she repeatedly asked her husband to clarify a troublesome phrase. She recalls that a third voice suddenly spoke up and clearly pronounced the passage in question for her. It may have only been the operator, but Sally Salazar says they believed from then on that the government had at least a general interest in Cuba-bound reporters and, possibly, a particular interest in Salazar.

Sally Salazar says, however, that her husband’s allegiance to his adopted country – he became a naturalized citizen on November 27, 1953, in El Paso, Texas – and to journalistic objectivity was unquestionable. She is angered that rumors persist that her husband was anything but a newsman doing the best job that he could.

The 1965 Dominican Republic trip was Salazar’s first experience as a foreign correspondent. As a Latino, Salazar was expected to do a good job reporting the U.S. Marine Corps invasion of Santo Domingo, ordered by then-president Lyndon Johnson. He did. He risked his life crawling from barricade to opposing barricade to interview insurgents and troops favoring the United States.

Salazar saw firsthand what much of Latin America considered to be a grievous affront – an open, military incursion to sway events in a country already heavily influenced by U.S. interests. Santo Domingo would be the foremost symbol of “Yankee Domination” in the hemisphere until it was replaced eight years later by the overthrow of Allende administration in Chile.

Sally Salazar remembers her husband's disappointment when the Pulitzer Prize judges passed over his 1965 Santo Domingo coverage in favor of some early Vietnam reporting. Salazar would cover that war the next year.

The Vietnam chapter of Salazar's passport-stamping career was remembered by a colleague at the *Times*, William Drummond, who wrote about him in a 1975 *Esquire* piece. During the evacuation of South Vietnam's An Lao Valley, Drummond recalled, Salazar and fellow newsman Joseph Brown decided to rent the last unoccupied hotel room in the town of Bong Son. They had slept on the ground for the previous three nights.

"Later, Ruben overheard the proprietor trying to find extra space to accommodate several refugee children who had been evacuated from An Lao Valley," Drummond remembered. "Why not put them in our room?" Ruben suggested. They spent the night that way: Ruben Salazar and Brown sleeping on the floor and seven Vietnamese youngsters sleeping in beds that were to have been the newsmen's."

Sleeping under Vietnamese skies wasn't the most dangerous episode of Salazar's tour. According to Sally, her husband had a close brush with death during the communist shelling of Da Nang. Salazar's time to die wasn't in 1966, though.

Nor was he to meet his fate in Panama two years later. He was riding in a jeep with a friendly rival from the *New York Times* when the vehicle was stopped by guerrillas. After heated discussion among the insurgents, it was decided to let the two journalists live to write another day.

The Mexico City-based correspondent didn't have to travel far to come under fire again. On October 2, 1968, Mexican soldiers opened fire on a student demonstration in the capital's Plaza of Three Cultures. At least scores died, hundreds were wounded and to this day there is no accurate count of the "disappeared."

Salazar hid for more than an hour in an apartment complex in the plaza, dodging machine-gun fire and soldiers who were confiscating other reporters' notes and film. Another journalist covering the massacre wasn't so lucky. Oriana Fallaci was shot in the thigh; her two companions on a balcony overlooking the mayhem were killed. They had been on either side of her.

As the Mexico City tour of duty drew to a close, Sally flew to Los Angeles with the couple's three children, and her husband drove the family car back to California.

Their 1965 Chevy Sedan had been observed at least once parked in the vicinity of the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City, meriting mention in a March 28, 1968, FBI memo.

That same document also says Salazar and several other unnamed persons had been scheduled for an interview with Assistant Attorney General J. Walter Yeagley.

Yeagley is a District of Columbia Court of Appeals judge today. Contracted for comment on the appearance of his name in the controversial newsman's dossier, the judge said he couldn't recall Salazar's name. Nor could he remember the matter scheduled for discussion, the other people to be quizzed, or even whether the Justice Department finally spoke with the journalist.

In all fairness, many people have forgotten Salazar's name and many details of his life. Thirteen years is a long time, as Yeagley pointed out. Yet the fact remains that much of Yeagley's work since he left private law practice in 1942 has been connected with national security.

From 1942 to 1948, Yeagley was an FBI special agent. He was chairman of the inter-departmental committee on internal security of the National Security Council from 1954 to 1959. Yeagley became an assistant attorney general in 1959 and remained with the Justice Department until rising to the Court of Appeals bench in 1970.

So, in 1968, Yeagley was definitely not a mere file clerk searching passport records for mention of permission for Salazar to go to Cuba. File clerks don't have profile sketches in Who's Who. Yeagley does. If every document released so far shows no anti-Americanism in the reporter's life, then it's a mystery why such an expert on the nation's internal security would be slated to speak with Salazar.

Ruben Salazar was living proof of the American Dream. He was born in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, on March 3, 1928, to Salvador Salazar of Guadalajara and Luz Chavez of Monterey. The Salazar family moved across the parched, concrete drainage canal that passes for the U.S.-Mexican border into El Paso, Texas, when Ruben was eleven months old. During the next forty-one years of Salazar's life, millions of other Mexican immigrants would follow the Salazar family's trail and come to the United States.

Salazar started work at the *El Paso Herald Post* in 1954. He lived and worked briefly in San Francisco before being hired in October 1959 by the *Los Angeles*

Times, a newspaper then moving away from boosterism and toward journalistic note.

About this time Salazar met the blonde, Italian-American woman who would travel the world with him, bear their two daughters and a son, and, much later, question the circumstances of his violent death after his name had faded from the newspaper headlines. He married Sally on May 15, 1960.

“The reporter won awards for a 1963 *Times* series on the Los Angeles Spanish-speaking community, which was tiny then compared to today’s population of two million strong. Seven years later, after serving as a foreign correspondent, Salazar’s beat would include following a Spanish community beset by demonstrations, school walkouts, and riots.

Then, in early 1970, Salazar struck a deal to become news director of KMEX-TV, while still keeping an iron in the fire at the *Times*: a weekly column on the Friday opinion page. It turned out to be a controversial forum, in which he shook up the white community. His column of July 24, 1970, was particularly significant (“A Beautiful Sight: the System Working the Way It Should.”)

“Anyone who has worked a police beat as a reporter, as I have,” Salazar wrote, “knows that policemen tend to have different attitudes toward enforcing the law depending on the social, financial, and racial makeup of the people they deal with.”

The subject of the column was an event eight days earlier, in which Los Angeles police officer had shot and killed two cousins, Guillard and Guillermo Sanchez, in their skid-row hotel room. The unarmed men had been sitting around with three other Mexicans that evening when police entered the building looking for a murder suspect from the San Francisco Bay area. The suspect was never found.

Shots were fired at a “Latin type,” though. At the sound of gunfire, Guillard Sanchez reportedly tried to flee through a back window, dressed only in his underpants. He was riddled with forty buckshot wounds and died later in the hospital. His cousin – the “Latin type” – was wounded in the heart and died in the hotel hallway.

As news director of KMEX, Salazar authorized the airing shortly thereafter of two interviews with survivors of the police shooting.

“The morning after the newscast,” Salazar wrote, “two policemen visited me to express their concern about the showing of the interviews. They did not question my right to run the interviews but warned me about the ‘impact’ the interviews would have on the police department’s image. Besides, they said, this kind of information could be dangerous in the minds of barrio people.”

Others criticized the killings more severely than Salazar. The congressman from East Los Angeles, Ed Roybal, said that the “utter lack of professionalism displayed by the policemen” was to blame for the Sanchezes’ deaths.

“More was lost that evening than the lives of these two men,” Roybal said. “The Mexican American community’s faith in and respect for their law enforcement agencies was totally shattered that night.”

Roybal asked for and got a federal grand jury investigation of the incident. The city’s district attorney filed charges against the officers involved.

In his column, Salazar praised the System: “In matters of human rights there is nothing more beautiful than to see the System work.

“The fast charges brought against seven policemen in the killings of two unarmed Mexicans gave the Chicano community a much needed breathing spell. Some of its leaders were beginning to despair East Los Angeles would ‘blow up’ unless there was a clear indication that working within the system is not just a synonym for selling out.”

Many Chicano militants felt that Salazar was a sellout *tío taco*. He lived in a comfortable suburb far from the East Los Angeles barrio. He had a prestigious, well paying job. He was married to a blonde. He was a political moderate preaching reform of the system rather than war against it.

But the column also contained criticism about police attitudes toward answering touchy questions:

“Some time ago I asked a high police official to confirm or deny information which I had which showed that a policeman who had just shot a Mexican-American boy had been suspended twice before, once for threatening another boy with a cocked pistol.

“‘Before I answer that,’ the police official said, ‘let me remind you that the release of such information will hurt your community more then it will hurt mine.’”

“The implications of that statement are staggering and too complicated to go into here. But one of the implications was that certain communities, in this instance, Mexican-Americans, cannot handle certain kinds of information.”

When a moderate like Salazar began to criticize the police department, a shift in public opinion was certainly occurring.

Thirty-six days later, Salazar was dead. Roybal’s commentary about the community’s loss of respect for law-enforcement agencies was magnified a thousandfold.

Several months later, all charges against the police involved in the Sanchez cousin’s deaths were dropped. The officers were defended with public funds and were given back pay. Salazar’s praise for the System’s justice was spoken too soon.

On the tenth anniversary of Salazar’s death last August, Frank Del Olmo called the dead newsman a “misunderstood martyr.” Now an editorial writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, Del Olmo was a newspaper intern during the summer of 1970 and worked briefly with Salazar. Before the journalist was killed, Del Olmo was considering his different career alternatives. He decided to stay at the *Times*, in a sense filling Salazar’s shoes.

“I will always remember the last conversation I had with him, the day before the Chicano Moratorium” [of August 29], Del Olmo wrote. “It was already looming as the biggest Chicano protest ever, and he was frankly hoping for a large crowd.

“‘We have really been covering it here,’ he said, referring to Channel 34’s newscast. ‘I hope the *gente* (people) really turn out for it. We have to show the Anglo what we can do.’”

Salazar had gone from reporting the Vietnam War first-hand to authorizing valuable news airtime to activities against it.

While living what appeared to be an Anglo life-style, Salazar also knew his heritage. Sally Salazar says that her husband had been contacted to teach a weekly Chicano Studies class at the University of California at Berkeley starting the following October.

The widow remembers other changes that Salazar began to show outwardly in the period between the killing of the Sanchez cousins and his own death. She says that her husband began coming home every day right after work at KMEX and would also notify her in advance of his exact location during the day.

Shortly before the Chicano Moratorium, Sally's father died and was cremated. The newsman told his wife, she recalls, that he wanted to be cremated when he died, also. Cremation was highly uncommon in the 1970's, even for lapsed Catholics (Salazar had lost interest in religion years earlier). His wife asked him why he would choose cremation instead of burial. She says he answered simply, "Ecology, my dear."

He was cremated less than two weeks later. The Los Angeles County Coroner, Thomas Noguchi would keep Salazar's organs in storage for a long time, though. His brain would be considered evidence.

In his final days, Salazar for some inexplicable reason cleaned out his wallet, took down all the pictures from his KMEX office walls, and gave colleague Guillermo Restrepo his book of phone numbers for news contacts, telling Restrepo to keep the book if Salazar didn't return to work on Monday.

Restrepo was with Salazar throughout the antiwar march. He was in the Silver Dollar Café with Salazar and two others from the news crew, Gustavo Garcia and Hector Fabio Franco, when Salazar was killed. Restrepo later told the televised inquest:

"Mr. Salazar was – as everybody knows – was a newsman, and he was in so many places, covering a lot of disturbances. He was in Vietnam, and the Dominican Republic, and in Mexico City, et cetera. When we were walking on Whittier Boulevard, Mr. Salazar was looking back like this almost every minute.

"When we were getting very close to the bar, I found that it was something funny going on, and I asked him, 'What's the matter?'

"And he says to me, 'I think I'm stupid.' And I didn't make any more comments.

"About a block before we get to the Silver Dollar Café, he says to me, 'Guillermo, I'm getting very scared.'"

The news crew ducked into the Silver Dollar to get off the riot-struck street and ordered a round of beers to kill time. They never finished them. Inquest witnesses

testified that deputies in front of the bar prevented patrons from leaving the Silver Dollar Café. These allegations were buttressed by the news photos taken at the time of the shooting by activist-magazine editor Raul Ruiz.

Deputies fired tear gas into the bar and patrons crawled on their hands and knees to the Silver Dollar's rear door. Reaching the back alley, Restrepo and the others realized that Salazar hadn't come out. Franco said that he had seen Salazar on the floor with blood around his head. Teargas fumes made going back inside impossible. At the inquest, Restrepo described this incident with deputies:

"I showed my press card. I was holding my LAPD press card like this and I told him, 'I am a newsman. I think that Ruben our news director has been killed and he's inside the bar.'

"The officer was pointing a gun at me and says, 'Get out of here and move on.'

"I told him again, I say, 'Listen, Salazar is inside the bar and he has been killed.'

"And he did the same thing.

"So I came back to the alley. And about that time there were more officers coming this way on the wall, with guns. And I came back to another officer and I told him, 'Our news director is inside and has been killed.' And he pointed the gun at me and said, 'Get out of here and move on.'

"... On Whittier ... I talked to another officer and told him the same thing. And he answered me that, 'Get out of here, move on.' So I spoke to a fireman.

"... I said to him that our newsman, our news director was inside the bar and he has been shot.

"And he says, 'Get out of here, move on.' He didn't even see my press card. I don't know why he didn't see it, because I had it in my right hand like this."

The testimony of Restrepo and sixty other witnesses is still available to the public in the coroner's General Hospital office, not far from where Salazar died. The inquest took sixteen days and the transcript amounts to a 2,025-page encyclopedia of conflicting allegations and protests. Deputies who testified claimed they had received a report of two armed men in the Silver Dollar. (The LAPD officers who shot the Sanchez cousins, it should be remembered, also thought there was an armed man in the building.)

Larry James Chavez also testified at the inquest. Chavez lived in the riot zone and watched the deputies from the south side of Whittier Boulevard, crouching between two parked cars. He described this scene after the shooting:

“Three deputies were around the door of the Silver Dollar. One deputy went inside the Silver Dollar. It was odd, because he kept on looking inside as if he were looking for something.... He was a deputy in dress uniform.

“... And then he called two more deputies over. They were in jump suits. And the deputies in the jump suits were talking to him, and they were pointing to the left-hand side of the bar and down, repeatedly they did this. They were discussing something, and they were pointing down. And they proceeded into the bar.... They passed the curtain area and went in toward the left-hand side of the bar again.

“And they came out.... They shook their heads. One deputy with jumpers slammed the door shut of the Silver Dollar Café.”

A padlock sealed the Silver Dollar, but the bar was entered at least once between the incident Chavez described and the official, police discovery of Salazar’s body more than two hours later.

The Silver Dollar’s owner hadn’t been in the bar at the time of the shooting. When Peter Martin Hernandez heard on his car radio about the rioting all along Whittier Boulevard, he remembered an M-1 carbine he kept in the bar’s locked broom closet. He didn’t want the weapon stolen.

Arriving at the Silver Dollar, Hernandez identified himself to Deputy Richard J. Maderos in the alley behind the bar. On Maderos’s recommendation, Hernandez gave the deputy the weapon to be tagged and taken to the nearby Sheriff’s substation. He was told that he could pick up the weapon later, after the riot had subsided. Maderos admitted to the inquest that he had told Hernandez that there had been reports of snipers in the area. Had there been?

Jimmy Flores, another inquest witness, had been inside the Silver Dollar during the fatal shooting. He testified that he heard a different sound after the teargas missile’s explosion. Flores said the noise was “like a pistol ... or rifle shot.”

The inquest ruling on October 5, 1970, was a split decision. The majority of the seven-member panel – Bennie R. Garcia, Betty J. Clements, Irene E. Ferguson,

and George W. Sherard – found that Salazar died “at the hands of another.” Michael Dewey Maddox, Ralph Howard Parry, and Anne C. Harris thought that the newsman’s death was an accident.

The inquest panel never cleared up the insistent rumors and outright charges of a conspiracy to kill Salazar or to cover up his death. On the other hand, the panel wasn’t empowered to do that or much of anything, prompting charges of a whitewash. There were repeated walkouts of the hearing room by moderates and militants.

City Councilman Billy Mills, from Los Angeles’s black community, estimated that there had been thirty-five police shootings under “suspicious circumstances” during the five-year period between the 1965 Watts riot and the Chicano Moratorium. Ruben Salazar became a statistic and a legend at the same time.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors awarded Salazar’s family an out-of-court settlement of more than \$700,000 in 1973. The night of Salazar’s death, Sally Salazar had hired Melvin Belli to represent her. She fired Belli for announcing the widow’s \$2.3 million wrongful-death lawsuit the day of the newsman’s funeral service, an action she considered disrespectful. The settlement was a record amount for the county. It also stopped the suit from reaching a binding court of law and a rearing of the more incredulous aspects of the case that were never straightened out in the inquest.

In his July 24, 1970, column cheering the indictments in the Sanchez killings, Salazar wrote, as you recall, that police were concerned that “certain communities, in this instance Mexican-Americans, [could] not handle certain kinds of information.”

If Ruben Salazar is a “misunderstood martyr,” it is only because so much information about his life and death isn’t public knowledge. Release of 226 FBI documents that span the newsman’s most controversial years could clear up some of the mystery.

Those documents also span a period of the Nixon administration that subsequent Freedom of Information Act disclosures have shown to be punctuated with illegal government acts and borderline infractions in the pursuit of intelligence goals. Consider this twist on the high police official’s ominous caution to Salazar: Whose community will be hurt the most by knowing the truth about a distinguished newsman who has, since his death, become a role model for a generation of barrio youth?

There is a portrait of Ruben Salazar in his widow's home, painted in shades of brown. Great detail fills in the newsman's eyes. Quicker strokes moving outward fill in the subject's nose, mouth, and cheeks. Just a stroke or two illustrate Salazar's other features. The eyes are penetrating, but the painting gives an unfinished feeling. Like Ruben Salazar.