Leon Eguía, after landing in occupied Germany in May 1945. He was there until November of 1945. As part of the 13th Airborne Division, they were surprised when they arrived in Berlin and could not find anybody. With his $20 allowance he would buy packs of cigarettes and trade them for cognac. He paid for this picture with a pack of cigarettes.

Reinventing Houston: Mexican Americans of the World War II Generation

By Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez

For Mexican Americans of the World War II generation, Houston held a particular allure as a city where men and women with few marketable skills could still find a job and could still make it. It was a generation that in many ways straddled two worlds in Texas. In their private world, their culture, language, and traditions were cherished and respected—Houston's Bonita Gardens Dance Hall, Mexico Bello (Beautiful Mexico), and Club Recreativo Tenochitlan held dances and other events to reinforce culture. Some movie theaters showed Mexican movies after 10 p.m.: it was 15¢ to get in and popcorn cost a nickel.[1] They also listened to KLVL and KATL. They loved Spanish-language love songs, but they also listened to Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller—and knew all of those tunes as well. But in the other world, the public one, their language was denigrated and few opportunities for advancement were available. The war experience afforded this generation of Mexican Americans the tools and, perhaps, the confidence, to mount the many struggles that would bring better options for them and the generations that have followed. Often, the word "Mexican" had been so disrespected that it seemed more advantageous to use "Latin American" or "Spanish" to describe their ethnicity.

It was hardly, however, a dormant community, as has been suggested or assumed by some.[2] The sources that mainstream historians may be drawn to as they document the history of this Gulf city during WWII, may include few, if any, references to Mexican Americans. So, in attempting to document the lives of Houston's Mexican American population during the WWII period, we are fortunate to have available oral histories with those men and women who lived in Houston during the war.

The U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project has interviewed over 500 people nationwide, 35 in Houston. Those archives will be available to the public, as they are processed, at the Nettie Lee Bensen Latin American Collection and at the Center for American History on The University of Texas at Austin campus.[3]

The lives of those who have been interviewed by our project, were, in many ways, similar. Most were born to working class parents. Medical care was expensive and out of the reach of many families; it was common for children born in this generation—roughly between 1916 and 1927—to lose one or both parents during their childhoods. Many worked, even as children, helping their parents with their own work in the agricultural fields, or striking out on their own, shining shoes, or delivering newspapers. Several attended segregated schools; some of those who attended mixed schools were punished if they were caught speaking Spanish. Often, they dropped out of school in junior high to work alongside their parents and supplement the family income.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez is Associate Professor of Journalism at The University of Texas at Austin and the director of the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project. The project has interviewed 35 WWII-era Latinos in Houston since 1999. She wishes to thank UT students Rajesh Reddy, Valentino Mauricio, and Julio Ovando, for their assistance in assembling material for this article. Special thanks also to volunteer interviewers Paul Zepeda and Ernest Eguía who have donated not only their time and considerable talent, but have also paid costs related to taping and photographing their subjects.

Parents of this WWII generation of Mexican Americans usually had to scramble to find any type of work that could put food on the table and pay the rent. It was largely a "low blue-collar" population, according to historian Arnoldo De Leon: "Mexican workers were in positions which offered paltry wages and similar hopes for economic improvement, at best."[4] In a community of 5,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans in 1930, more than 60% of the Mexican Americans held "low-blue collar jobs," such as servants, waiters or waitresses, porters, truck drivers, barbers, deliverymen, housekeepers, launderers, and other types of laborers. Nearly 14% of the men and 31% of the Hispanic females held "high blue collar" jobs. Those jobs included carpenters, tailors, bakers, machinists, shoemakers, and building painters.[5]

For Mexican Americans who would be young adults at the outset of WWII, in Houston and elsewhere, poverty was the norm. There were few opportunities for advancement, and there was a social system that relegated both Hispanics and African Americans to an inferior status. Many interviewed say that, in retrospect, they were poor growing up. But, because all the families in the "barrio" were also poor, they accepted it as a natural course.

Robert Zepeda's family was among them.[6] Father, Guadalupe, and mother, Lina Rodriguez Zepeda, arrived in Baytown from Mexico and raised eleven children, including four sons who served in the military during WWII: Roberto, Daniel, Elías, and Isaac. The elder Zepeda worked as a laborer for the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific Railways before and during the war, and afterwards became a gang foreman for the Missouri Pacific. During the war, he was a section block leader for the Civil Defense, alerting neighbors to keep shades drawn—as a precaution against nighttime air attacks from Axis forces.

Education was a luxury for many Mexican Americans of this generation. Some people, like Saragosa Garcia, were fortunate to have parents who valued schooling. Garcia was born in Rosenberg, 35 miles southwest of Houston. His parents became increasingly disenchanted with the schools there. (Young Saragosa spent three years in third grade in Rosenberg.) The final straw came when his parents learned Mexican

Saragosa Garcia in Luxembourg

children were being sent to dig holes outside in the schoolyard, while Anglo children were being taught inside. His father moved his family to Houston, where young Saragosa attended Robert E. Lee Elementary School. Saragosa was finally promoted to the fourth grade, at the age of thirteen. A very special teacher named Mrs. Smith gave him a Bible. He would later carry that Bible with him at Normandy during WWII. "I still have that Bible today," he said.[7]

The War Years

In the fall of 1940—before the outbreak of war—Congress authorized a peacetime draft and ordered 77,177 young men in Harris County to register.[8] In the next few years, Mexican American men from Houston would either be drafted or enlist. Their approach to military service varied. For some, it was a patriotic statement to demonstrate a civic obligation; to others, it was an adventure so that they might see a world they were barely aware of; and to some, it was, perhaps not surprisingly, a chance for a steady paycheck. For the most part, they served in all branches, not in segregated units, as did African Americans. Many of the men were somewhat prepared for military life because they had served in the Civilian Conservation Corps before—so the regimentation of the military was familiar. The battlefield, however, was a new experience and Mexican Americans fought in every theater.

Mexican American women served in a new Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, or WAACs, headed by Oveta Culp Hobby. The development of a branch of the military for women served several functions, not the least of which was providing a workforce for the non-combat duties necessary to the war effort.[9] Felicitas Cerda, later Flores, joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Corps and stayed stateside, working as a clerk typist in Maryland. She lived in barracks with other girls from other backgrounds and learned to appreciate other cultures. She was selected to be among four girls who traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with congressmen. Years later, she would treasure the memories of visiting museums and landmarks in the nation's capital.[10]

The military experience for Mexican Americans provided them a new vantage point from which to view themselves and society. And beyond that, after the war, there were new opportunities: the GI Bill was available for those returning men who were eager to pick up a trade or learn a profession. The exact numbers of Mexican Americans, in particular, or Hispanics in general, who served in the military during WWII is difficult to pin down. Estimates vary widely, from 250,000 to 750,000. One difficulty is that the military had no consistent method to tally Hispanics. Discharge papers for Mexican Americans, for instance, note that they are "white" in some cases, "Mexican" in others, and "NA," presumably "not applicable" in others.[11]

Several families had more than one son away fighting. Homes hung small banners in their windows with a star for each son in war. When a son had been killed in war, there was a distinctive gold star on the banner. Mexican American women were among the thousands of American women who earned the title of "Gold Star Mothers."

Postwar

Within the military organization, it was not uncommon for the Mexican American men who have been interviewed to have been the only Latino in their outfit and many have said they were treated like any other

American. This made the transition back to civilian life with its old prejudices all the more difficult. Ambitious young men like A.D. Azios, who grew up in Laredo, but later moved to Houston, were eager to return back home to Texas and "reinvent life," as he would later put it.[12]

But in Houston, and elsewhere in Texas, integrating that newfound sense of equality would prove difficult—so much so that men like Alfred Hernandez would later contemplate leaving his hometown of Houston for a city in another state where he and his young family would be more welcome. Hernandez, born on August 23, 1917, in Mexico City, was raised in Houston where his parents moved when he was a small child. During the war, he was sworn in as a U.S. citizen. After the war, he would vote for the first time and later become the first Hispanic judge in Harris County since 1845.

But life in Houston after the war did not seem promising. After he returned, Hernandez realized the obstacles facing Mexican Americans in Texas. He wanted to move, either "up North" or back to Mexico, where he felt there would be greater acceptance. "After discussing the way I felt with my wife, she soon convinced me we should stay in Houston and get involved and make an effort to fix the problems here," he said.[13]

He was not the only one who encountered old prejudices. Many would not be satisfied with the life that was left for them. They sought to improve life for Mexican Americans in Houston, a theme that runs through many of the interviews, by joining organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) or the American GI Forum.

One example is that of Ernest Eguía, who dropped out of the 10th grade at Sam Houston High School and worked as a salesman at Buck's Dry Goods. He was drafted in 1941 and eventually rose to the rank of staff sergeant, as part of the 144th Field Artillery Battalion of the II Corp, 1st Army. He would arrive at Normandy, on June 11, 1944, a few days after D-Day. He was part of the Allied forces that drove Germany through France and, after V-E Day, remained in occupied Germany, assigned to restructuring the fallen country.

"I thought coming back to Texas, things would have changed," Eguía recalled. But it was soon apparent that Mexican Americans faced problems. "A friend came up to me one day and he invited me to join LULAC…I turned him down…"[14] Eguía's friend told him of the case of Macario García, Medal of Honor recipient, who had been denied a cup of coffee in a restaurant near Houston.[15] A fight ensued and García and his friends tore up the restaurant. The café owners then sued García and his friends for damages. In response, LULAC Council #60 organized a defense committee and Ernest Eguía was among those who responded. "That… changed my mind," Eguía said. "I did join LULAC and we did help Macario raise $6,000 for his fight against the suit. But the people at the restaurant, because they got such bad publicity, not only locally, but nationally, because of what happened, dropped the suit."[16]

Robert Ramon, writing a letter home.

As far as civil service, there were few, if any Hispanic police officers or firefighters. The year was 1953 and Leon Eguía, Ernest's little brother, was LULAC Council #60 president. Leon Eguía had risen to tech sargeant in the Army as a paratrooper with the 13th Airborne Division, attached to the 82nd noted for both parachuting and gliding over the Rhine River in Dusseldorf. Leon Eguía was accustomed to fighting against the odds, which would serve him well. "We were instrumental in getting the city to come together and we forced them," Leon Eguía recalled, "to accept Mexican American applicants in the fire and police departments."[17]

In one meeting that same year with municipal officials and LULAC members, city officials stipulated that police officers had to be 5'10" tall, weigh 165 pounds, and have a high school education. One Hispanic leader turned to the LULAC members and asked how many could qualify. "About 50 stood up," Leon Eguía recalled.[18]

Two years later, Leon Eguía would become the eighth Hispanic hired by Houston's Fire Department, and worked there for twenty years. His only regret was that the siren on his fire truck left him slightly deaf.[19]

Conclusion

The WWII generation of Mexican Americans changed the face of Houston. Where there were few opportunities before, they not only climbed up, but also opened doors for others who followed. They used organizations such as LULAC and the American GI Forum and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund to ensure greater participation of Mexican Americans.

The style of this generation would be understated, compared to the political activists who would come later in the 1960s and 1970s. But the messages delivered were no less poignant and effective. One example centers around San Jacinto Day, a day that is commemorated within the context of Texas' independence from Mexico, itself a sore point for Mexican Americans, who sometimes feel that war is carried on to this day. In 1944, LULAC began a new tradition of placing a wreath at San Jacinto Memorial Park on April 21. LULAC member John J. Herrera remarked:

"From San Jacinto and the Alamo to Pearl Harbor, Bataan, and Corregidor, the Latin Americans have fought side by side to their brother Anglo Americans, and the armed forces of our country, the Army, the Navy and the Marines are loaded with determined young Latin Americans whose only thought and attitude is to 'Set the Rising Sun' and to 'Beat the Axis.'"[20]

What Herrera did not say, but was clear to his audience, was that Texas Mexican Americans were patriotic Americans, and had been since the state's war for independence. WWII afforded yet another battlefield for Mexican Americans to demonstrate their loyalty to a state and a nation that still had to be convinced. ★