MEXICANS IN HOUSTON: THE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE, 1908-1975

BY F. ARTURO ROSALES*

On the evening of March 2, 1908, a small number of Mexican immigrants met at a Houston home and convened the first meeting of El Campo Laurel lodge. The organization became a chapter of the Woodmen of the World, an international mutual aid organization popular among Mexican workers in the United States. The individuals who met that night recognized that their numbers in Houston were sufficient collectively to address some of the problems they encountered in the city. At least two thousand Mexicans were living in Houston and its environs that year. Most were young, separated from their families and roots in Mexico, and surrounded by a new world full of hostility, loneliness, and insecurity. Unlike their compatriots who had migrated to San Antonio or Los Angeles, cities whose Hispanic origins were still evident, Mexicans who came to Houston did not find familiar surroundings. El Campo Laurel became the first formal Mexican organization to offer the immigrants fraternal companionship, recreation, and limited security in the form of life insurance.

Actually, Mexicans had been in the city since its founding in 1836 when, as prisoners taken at the Battle of San Jacinto, they were forced, along with Negro slaves, to clear the swampy land along Buffalo Bayou in preparation for a land development scheme initiated by John and Augustus Allen, two New York entrepreneurs. Out of this enterprise Houston was born, and during the rest of the nineteenth century Anglo and European settlers poured in. In the

²See Alberto Camarillo, Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) and Francisco A. Rosales, "Mexican Emigration to Chicago, Houston and Tuscon: Comparisons and Contrasts" in Barry J. Kaplan and Rosales, eds., "Houston: The Twentieth Century Urban Frontier" (unpublished manuscript) pp. 20-45.

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^{3&}quot;Campo Laurel," Woodmen of the World (small collection), HMRC.

State University gives a historical overview of the Mexican experience in this city. For several years a member of the University of Houston history faculty, Rosales utilized local documentation in writing his essay and was crucial in establishing the Mexican American archival collection at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, thus providing research material for future scholarship. His article traces the Mexican American presence in Houston from the time prisoners from Santa Anna's army were used to clear Buffalo Bayou, through the formation of the *colonia* as a viable community by 1920, until the present as Mexican Americans become one of the most rapidly growing segments of our population. This essay is a needed point of departure for further studies.

The second article by Dr. Carlos B. Gil of the University of Washington is a biographical sketch of Houstonian Lydia Mendoza, perhaps the most famous living Mexican American cultural figure. A singer who began her career in the late 1920s and early '30s, her life and songs are, in many ways, representative of the Chicano experience of the last half century. The third article by sociologist Tatcho Mindiola speaks to the problems and possibilities of Mexican American assimilation, an issue as alive today as it has been for the last one hundred and fifty years of Texas history. Dr. Mindiola's contemporary piece is followed by an edited letter written by a local Mexican American women's organization in 1937. This document poignantly outlines the difficult position of Hispanic residents in Houston and illustrates that they have traditionally assessed their condition within Texas society.

This special publication of *The Houston Review* anticipates other scholarly articles dealing with ethnic topics which we hope to feature in upcoming issues. The consideration of our local history and culture without inclusion of our ethnic heritage, whether Mexican, German, Irish, Italian, Greek, Czech, Polish, African, French, or Chinese, would be woefully incomplete.

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meantime, Mexican merchants came to live and trade in Houston and presumably some of the prisoners also remained; but Mexicans, in the prerailroad era, were a small minority. A few were visible on market days as vendors, but the rest lived in relative isolation working as cooks, farmhands, and laborers. Then the railroads, built in the 1880s and 1890s throughout Texas, transformed the state's economy.

In rural areas, cotton plantations, using white and black sharecroppers and tenants, and vast cattle and sheep ranges yielded to modern methods of agriculture and livestock raising. Cities like Galveston and Houston became important entrepots that siphoned the products of Texas to the world. The completion of the ship channel in 1914 allowed large seagoing vessels to load and disembark their cargos at the city's doorstep, and assured Houston's predominance as the major port on the Gulf Coast. Finally, a combination of the port, the availability of oil, which was discovered in 1901, and easy access to the fertile cotton fields of Texas made Houston an important manufacturing center as refineries, textile plants, and compresses sprang up along the length of the channel. These dramatic changes throughout Texas also created a demand for more labor that could not be met by the resident population of the state, and employers increasingly turned to Mexico as a source of plentiful, cheap labor.

By 1908 Texas was the principal destination of Mexican immigrants seeking work in the United States. In Houston the vast majority of the new arrivals labored in the railroad yards or in building the ship channel. Initially, most Mexicans resided near the railroad depots in barrios like "El Crisol," so named because it housed a plant which weatherproofed railroad ties with creosote, a pungent chemical that filled the air with its aroma. After 1910 El Segundo Barrio, located in the second ward near the downtown district, emerged as the major Mexican neighborhood. There the Southern Pacific and other railroads became the major employers. El Campo Laurel lodge started there, and the Rusk Settlement House, which mainly helped Jewish immigrants, also assisted Mexicans. Children who went to school attended Rusk

'Works Projects Administration, *Houston, A History and Guide* (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1942), p. 42; Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *The Port of Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 44; Lee Harley, "Texas Types in Contrast," *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. 81 (June 1890), pp. 222-246.

³For the history of Houston's economic development, see David McComb, Houston: The Bayou City (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968) and Sibley, The Port of Houston.

⁶For an appraisal of Mexican labor recruitment early in this century, see Mark Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Emigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1942 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976).

'Rudolfo Acuña, Occupied America: The Chicanos' Struggle Toward Liberation (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972), p. 131.

⁸Luis Cano, "Dissertation Proposal" (College of Education, University of Houston, 1976).

Elementary and within a few short years it became known as the "Mexican School." Still, they had no churches or other institutions that could assist them in adapting to their new environment, except for the Woodmen whose membership was limited.9

Only two years after the founding of El Campo Laurel, the large number of Mexican Roman Catholics arriving in Houston caught the attention of the Church. The bishop of the Galveston Diocese charged a Spanish priest, Esteban de Anta, with ministering to them. In 1911 a mission was started in El Segundo Barrio and eventually it became Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. In spite of the sincere efforts of the Diocese, it is doubtful that the church served to bolster the cultural identity of Mexicans during this crucial period of adjustment. The nuns and priests who initially administered the mission viewed their congregation rather paternalistically, since they had difficulty understanding the culture of their parishioners and often saw them as nominally Catholic. Father de Anta, for example, considered them "dismally poor and ignorant, primarily because of their absence from the church." Nevertheless, Our Lady of Guadalupe became a focal point of barrio life, and as Mexican priests came to Houston fleeing political persecution in Mexico, the Catholic church became more relevant to the Mexican community. In the meanwhile, Protestant proselytizing among the almost exclusively Catholic immigrants resulted in the establishment of Baptist, Presbyterian, and "Holy Roller" churches. 10

The 1910 Mexican Revolution briefly disrupted the immigration to the United States. Many immigrants returned to Mexico to join the struggle or, as was generally the case of those from Houston, to protect their families. During the subsequent decade, however, economic necessity and violence prompted thousands of refugees to cross the border into the United States. Between 1910 and 1920 over half of the Mexicans in Houston came from Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, and San Luis Potosí. Eventually, the protracted struggles in Mexico so disrupted life that in the 1920s an unprecedented migration occurred from the populous west central states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacan, and immigrants from these states came to dominate the *colonia* of Houston. 12

*Corrine S. Tsanoff, *Neighborhood Doorways* (Houston: Neighborhood Centers Association, 1958), pp. 6-7.

¹⁰Sister Mary Paul Valdez, *The History of the Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence* (n.p., 1978), pp. 4-5; Houston *Chronicle*, November 9, 1930; Timothy L. Smith, "Religion and Ethnicity in America," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 83 (December 1978), pp. 1155-1185.

Meanwhile, the Chicano community continued to mushroom. World War I was a boom era for Houston industries, and as the demand for oil and cotton rose, the need for Mexican workers increased. Houston employers who most needed Mexican workers sent enganchistas ("labor contractors") to San Antonio which was the first major stop for immigrants entering Texas. During 1918 Socorro Sarabia, a young contractor for the Southern Pacific, brought eight trainloads from San Antonio, each containing hundreds of immigrants who had recently arrived in Texas.¹³ During the years of the revolution, Mexicans saturated the labor market in many parts of the United States. At the end of the war, American soldiers returned to Houston and displaced Mexicans from their iobs. Also, labor unions complained bitterly about the huge influx of Mexicans and its possible harmful effects upon gains they had made during the war. Mexicans found little work and had to survive at just above the subsistence level. And "those that did not work for the railways or the fields worked wherever they were hired for fifteen to twenty cents an hour. . . . Since the father hardly earned a living, most children did without."14

One result of such poverty was dismally poor housing conditions. A nun from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church recalled that the immigrants lived in "two, three room houses, very cheaply constructed of unpainted lumber. There was not much protection against the heat, cold or rain. . . . There was usually only one common water faucet for a group of houses." Many of the railroad workers lived in boxcars, sometimes more than one family in a car. The children often went barefoot, even in winter, and "slept on the floor on cotton picking sacks, if they possessed any," because "mattresses and bedding were unknown."

The vast majority of Mexican parents, whose children went to the segregated public schools, had acquired little or no formal education in their native country. The rate of illiteracy was about 75 percent, and upon arriving in Houston, many viewed the educational system with trepidation. School officials, on the other hand, maintained a rigid policy of Americanization and punished the children if they spoke Spanish. Confused and resentful, parents did not encourage school attendance and many children stayed home, "playing in the streets, even on school days." The school district seldom discouraged absenteeism in the Mexican barrios since it did not even assign truancy officers to the Rusk school. The parochial school at Our Lady of Guadalupe offered an alternative; but even though the tuition was not expensive, few could afford it. Still, between 1911 and 1930, about one thousand students at-

[&]quot;Houston Chronicle, November 22, 1910.

[&]quot;Rosales, "Mexican Emigration to Chicago, Houston and Tuscon," p. 5. The term colonia was used by Mexican immigrants to denote their presence in American cities. It did not define a neighborhood's boundaries; the word barrio fulfilled that function.

[&]quot;Valentina Sarabia, "The Mexican Immigrant in Houston" (term paper, Department of History, University of Houston).

¹⁴James Maroney, "Organized Labor in Texas, 1900-1929" (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 1975), p. 38; Valdez, *The History of the Missionary Catechists of Divine Providence*, p. 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

tended Our Lady of Guadalupe school, many of them graduating from the eighth grade, an unusual achievement in that era. 16

With poverty came other attendant social ills that plagued the colonia. Poor health was among the most vexing of these problems. In the winter of 1919 an influenza epidemic killed a number of persons in the barrios, most of them children. Pneumonia and tuberculosis were the illnesses that most debilitated the crowded neighborhood, and mortality rates for Mexicans were higher than for the population in general. Few if any physicians were available. Mexicans used home remedies and folk-healers when attempting to assuage these problems.¹⁷ With funds from the Community Chest, a women's Catholic group founded the Mexican Clinic to minister to the health needs of the barrios. The clinic, situated in El Segundo Barrio, operated with volunteer medical professionals. Over the years thousands of needy residents in the Mexican neighborhoods of Houston used the clinic, which was eventually named San Jose, and for a long time it was the only form of professional help available. In the late 1920s, physicians from Mexico established practices in the colonia, increasing the options available in health care; but even though they charged less than prevailing fees, many laborers found it difficult to afford them.18

Accidents and violence, common in Houston during the early part of the century, appeared to affect Mexicans out of proportion to their numbers in the city. The newspapers of the era were replete with stories depicting Mexicans being run over by automobiles, horses, trains, or dying in work accidents. City ordinances governing safety in the streets and places of employment were outmoded and failed to keep pace with the rapid growth of the city. Politicians maintained a laissez faire attitude toward municipal involvement in the everyday affairs of citizens, and whatever laws existed were rarely enforced in the barrios. 19 Newspapers also regularly reported assaults on Mexicans by other

Mexicans and different ethnic groups.²⁰ But it was police brutality that most disturbed the Mexicans in the Houston *colonia*. From the time that Mexicans first arrived in the city, law enforcement in their neighborhoods was arbitrary, and *colonia* residents became hardened and cynical in their view of the police. They saw friends and acquaintances beaten, shot, and killed by reserve officers, railroad guards, and nightwatchmen; and although at times there was no obvious reason for the violence, authorities initiated few investigations.

In 1924 Fernando Salas, a businessman, helped start La Asemblea Mexicana in response to the problems that the community faced with the police. As a consequence, some communications developed between the *colonia* leadership and the police department. By 1928 La Asemblea acted informally in advising the chief of police, and obtained the release of numerous Mexicans whose rights were violated. Indeed, the police chief admitted that Mexicans were rarely arrested for serious crimes, yet Harris County maintained a special prison far south of the city for Mexican convicts. Also as a result of Asemblea pressure, the police department added Mexican officers to patrol the barrios.²¹

Concerned with other issues of discrimination, in the mid-1920s, La Asemblea joined with black leaders in condemning the rise of Ku Klux Klan influence among the city's leadership. La Asemblea also attempted to alleviate some of the serious problems that Mexican children encountered in the public schools. In 1924, because of the high rates of absenteeism in barrio schools, the membership urged school officials to open a truancy office in the Mexican neighborhood and recommended that the "no Spanish in school" policy be revoked because it alienated student and parent alike and aggravated truancy.²²

Most members of the *colonia* did not have much inclination or time for civic activism. Working, or seeking employment, was their major preoccupation. During the war years, workers from Mexico were welcomed in the Houston area, but during the 1921 recession, which severely affected agricultural states like Texas, a nativist reaction to the presence of Mexicans began as more of them became unemployed. The Mexican Consul in Galveston announced early in 1921 that his government would pay for the repatriation of its unemployed citizens from the Houston-Galveston area because they were receiving so much harassment. In Dallas and Fort Worth, conditions were worse. Unemployed white and black workers, in one instance, marched on Fort Worth City Hall to demand that Mexicans be returned home. Indeed, about two thousand were sent to Mexico that year after the city conducted a massive roundup of undocumented aliens ²³

^{&#}x27;eReisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, p. 24, Cano, "Dissertation Proposal," p. 12; "History of Our Lady of Guadalupe School" (typescript), Our Lady of Guadalupe School (small collection), HMRC.

¹⁷Valdez, History of the Missionary Catechists, p. 10; La Gaceta Mexicana, February 15, 1928.

[&]quot;"'History of San Jose Clinic' (typescript), San Jose Clinic (small collection), HMRC; La Gaceta Mexicana, September 15, 1928.

[&]quot;Houston Chronicle, sample years 1908, 1910, 1914, 1917, 1921, 1924. Thirty accidents were recorded in newspaper accounts that resulted in deaths of Mexicans; for an analysis of the laissez faire attitudes of civic leaders and a history of law enforcement in Houston, see Charles P. Kaplan, "Houston and the Twentieth Century Environmental Ideal" and Louis J. Marchiafava, "Law Enforcement on the Urban Frontier" in Kaplan and Rosales, eds., "Houston: The Twentieth Century Urban Frontier," pp. 89-116, 220-240.

²⁰Houston *Chronicle*, February 8, July 31, 1908, April 14, 1914, July 14-20, 1914, December 11, 1917, September 14, 1925, April 4, 1927, May 5, 1932.

²¹Frank Gibler, interview with author in Houston in 1978; La Gaceta Mexicana, May 1, September 15, 1928; Houston Chronicle, February 27, 1924.

²²Frank Gibler, interview; Cano, "Dissertation Proposal," p. 5.

²³Houston Chronicle, January 9, February 18, March 20, April 22, May 15, May 24, 1921; Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, pp. 51-56.

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Houston, with an economy based on oil, recovered quicker from the economic crisis, and a period of unparalleled prosperity commenced. The city's population increased in the 1920s from one hundred fifty-five thousand to two hundred thirty thousand as a consequence of immigration. Rapid urban growth also provided more jobs traditionally held by Mexicans, swelling the existing Mexican colonia of the city. According to census reports, the number of Mexicans increased from about six thousand in 1920 to about fourteen thousand five hundred by 1930, making the barrios and their institutions more visible in Houston.²⁴ As the Mexican population grew, a shift in their residential patterns occurred. By 1920 the Second Ward, dominated by other ethnic groups earlier in the decade, became predominantly Mexican and another large barrio emerged further east along the ship channel in Magnolia Park.²⁵

Throughout most of the 1920s, the Southern Pacific remained the largest single employer of Mexican labor, especially in the Second Ward. Most of their track repair workers and railroad yard laborers were Mexicans recruited in San Antonio by the company's own agency. The company maintained quarters for some of their workers in El Segundo Barrio, but since these usually consisted of boxcars, families quickly moved out as soon as they could afford it. The railroads paid Mexicans \$2.50 a day, which were among the highest wages available to them in Houston. In the rooming house area closer to the downtown district, also located in the Second Ward, lived hundreds of young Mexican men who worked in the hotels, bakeries, restaurants, and coffee houses as busboys, porters, cooks, and dishwashers. Overcrowding was more acute in this area, where as many as ten workers occupied one room, some known as "black holes" because there were no windows. The majority of workers, however, found work on a day-to-day basis through hiring halls operated by private businessmen. One of these, the Big Four Employment Agency, was run by Mexicans in the Second Ward. These individuals advertised in La Gaceta Mexicana that they, unlike other agencies, "were concerned with the dignity of the Mexican working man." Most of the laborers became members of work gangs for construction firms and private contractors during a time when rapid growth precipitated a building boom in Houston.26

²⁴For a discussion of 1920s prosperity, see McComb, *Houston*, pp. 92-166; Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930.*

In Magnolia, which by 1930 became the city's largest barrio. Mexicans were engaged in more diverse occupations than in El Segundo Barrio. There, no single source of employment dominated the work patterns of the inhabitants as the railroads and the service sector did in the barrios closer to the downtown area. The turning basin of the ship channel, wharves, and related industries were adjacent to the colonia. Many of the men found work in cotton compresses, cement plants, and construction activities. Oil refineries sprang up along the length of the channel after its completion in 1914. They were mostly located outside the city limits closer to Galveston and in communities like Baytown. In Magnolia, Mexican women worked in greater numbers than any other area of town, mostly in textile plants that specialized in making burlap sack for wrapping cotton bales. One of these workers, Guadalupe González, a native of Nuevo Leon, moved to Magnolia with her father and sisters from Corpus Christi, because "picking cotton was too hard for my sisters and my father who was sick and we heard that work for women was available in Houston."27

In sharp contrast to the almost castelike position to which the majority of the working population was relegated, some Mexicans did achieve social mobility. A number of young girls, for example, found positions as stenographers and office clerks. Many of the Spanish-speaking men also were employed in jobs which allowed them some status and prestige. Alberto Garcia was a projectionist at the Washington Theatre, and William Nuñez managed an entire floor at Krupp and Tuffly Company. One of the most desired consumer items for Mexican women, even in Mexico, was the Singer sewing machine. These machines could be found in even the poorest of homes, both in Mexico and the United States. The company employed thousands of Spanish-speaking salesmen on both sides of the border who, because of the popularity of their product, did very well financially.²⁸ In addition, several Mexican students graduated from Rice University and joined the professions.²⁹ Francisco Chairez and P. L. Niño, who obtained degrees in civil engineering, became two of the most respected individuals of the *colonia*.³⁰

²⁵Tsanoff, Neighborhood Doorways, pp. 13-17.

¹⁶For wages of Mexican workers in railroads, see Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, pp. 15-17; *Houston City Directory 1930*, occupations determined for 218 Houston Mexican workers, 41 worked for Southern Pacific and 35 in hotels and restaurants. Fifteen women worked in burlap making plants; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, Vol. 3, p. 1593 shows similar proportions. Out of 3,370 gainfully employed Mexican workers in 1930, 568 worked in railroads, 382 in restaurant and hotel related businesses, 293 as laborers in road and street work and 259 as construction laborers.

²⁷Ibid.; Guadalupe González, interview with author in Houston in 1975.

²⁸Luis González y González, San José de Gracia: Mexican Town in Transition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975).

²⁹Houston City Directory 1930, out of 218 Mexican heads of households, 13 had white-collar jobs and 3 were attending Rice University; La Gaceta Mexicana, May 1, 1928.

³⁰Mrs. Maria Puente, interview with Thomas H. Kreneck in Houston on October 26, 1978 (OH 235), HMRC.

The vast majority of the community's successful individuals, however, did not rely on employment in Anglo firms. Independent businessmen and professionals who provided services directly to the Mexican community dominated the Spanish-speaking, elite structure of the city. According to one contemporary newspaper account, the barrios contained countless "... drugstores, restaurants, private offices, filling stations, grocery stores, bakery shops, a talkie theatre, schools, art shops, an ice factory, barbershops, furniture and dry good stores, all in Spanish and conducted by Spanish-speaking persons." Giving great impetus to these endeavors was the ability of Mexican businessmen to provide products which the immigrant could not obtain in Anglo establishments. Thus, La Poblana Chocolate factory, El Cuauhtemoc Ice Cream Company and numerous smaller shops catered to specific consumer habits of the colonia's residents.31 Some of these businesses became extremely successful, providing for their owners substantial wealth and status. El Alamo Furniture Company, owned and operated by Francisco Gabino Hernandez, took up an entire square block in downtown Houston and had numerous employees, along with eight shiny, new delivery trucks. The Sarabia brothers, José, Socorro, Felipe, and Jesús, were another family of entrepreneurs who came from a poor farming village in Guanajuato. In Houston they established several businesses which included a movie theatre, a bookstore, a curio and record store, and a magazine publication. Socorro, the first Sarabia resident, came to Texas in 1910 as a fourteen year old boy working on the railroads and in the lumber industry of East Texas and Louisiana. Eventually, he became a contractor recruiting workers for the Southern Pacific Railroad on a commission basis until he acquired enough money to finance his later enterprises.32

Before 1910 Mexican immigrants were mainly working class and poor. The revolution, however, eroded the economic position of more privileged groups, threatening their well-being and forcing many to emigrate. Included in their ranks were professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and teachers, actors, singers, musicians, and businessmen. In Houston, however, as the *colonia* grew between 1910 and 1920, few immigrants were of this class. Most middle-class refugees who came to Texas preferred communities like San Antonio which contained large Mexican *colonias* where they could effectively ply their trades.³³ Because of the increasing Mexican immigration into the city after

1920, Houston also became attractive to professionals who would "scout" the area before moving in. The influx of middle-class refugees further mounted with the advent of the Cristero Wars in the late twenties. These struggles, precipitated by the Calles government's attempt to implement anticlerical measures, were centered in central Mexico where church roots were more deeply rooted. Owing to the turmoil of the struggles, the first Mexican physician in Houston, Angel Leyva, came during this time after being unable to practice his profession in his native Puebla.

In addition, a small group of conservative Mexican intellectuals gathered in Houston during this time and convinced a few local Mexican businessmen to underwrite some of their activities. José Sarabia, one of these businessmen, founded La Gaceta Mexicana, a magazine of literary essays and social news which Lorenzo Yañez edited. The editorial views in La Gaceta were markedly nationalistic and conservative, imploring the members of the colonia to behave in a manner befitting decent Mexican citizens. In addition, the publishers used the journal to encourage the Mexican populace of Houston to patronize Mexican-owned businesses. More importantly, almost every issue of La Gaceta warned the Mexicans of Houston about the perils of assimilation and losing sight of respectable Mexican values. For businessmen, advice on good business practices was a regular feature imploring Mexicans to learn from the yanquis. Also, essays about Mexican history, music, and literature, and laudatory reviews of performances by Mexican artists became weekly features of the magazine.³⁶

Besides *La Gaceta*, other publications sprang up in the *colonia* of Houston. At least four newspapers, *La Tribuna*, *El Anunciador*, *El Tecolote*, and *La Prensa*, appeared with regularity during the 1920s. *El Tecolote* had a circulation of about three thousand and was published weekly by Rodolfo Avila de la Vega. *El Tecolote*, like *La Gaceta*, printed mainly social news and avoided what the publisher considered "negativism." Blaso Alonso Capatillo, editor of *La Tribuna*, was decidedly more outspoken in his political views than his colleagues. His newspaper, however, reflected more his position as a political exile in opposition to the Calles regime in Mexico than his views on conditions of Mexicans in Houston. In 1928 Capatillo returned to Mexico to join the Serrano insurrection against the Calles government and was killed in battle.³⁷

¹¹Houston Chronicle, November 9, 1930; Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Vol. 3, p. 1593 shows 125 Mexican retailers in Houston; La Gaceta Mexicana, February 1, 1928.

[&]quot;La Gaceta Mexicana, September 15, 1928; Sarabia, "The Mexican Immigrant in Houston," pp. 1-5.

[&]quot;See Rosales, "The Mexican Revolution and Emigration to the United States, 1910-1923," Current Latin American Issues and Research: Proceedings of the Meetings of the Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies (Omaha: University of Nebraska, 1978), pp. 120-126. Valdez, The History of the Missionary Catechists, p. 11.

[&]quot;The Cristero Wars refer to the rebellion in Mexico lasting from 1926 to 1929 of militant Catholics against the Mexican government. The Catholics were called "Cristeros" because of their battle cry *Viva Cristo Rey* ("Long Live Christ the King").

[&]quot;Valdez, The History of the Missionary Catechists, p. 3; La Gaceta Mexicana, May 1, September 15, 1928.

³⁶La Gaceta Mexicana, February 15, May 1, 1928.

³⁷Herminio Rios and Guadalupe Castillo, "Toward a True Chicano Bibliography: Mexican American Newspapers, 1862-1942," *El Grito*, Vol. 3 (Winter 1969), pp. 22-36; Houston *Chronicle*, November 8, 1930.

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None of the publications gave much space to such issues as discrimination, police violence, or the effects of poverty, problems that were obvious to members of the *colonia*. All reflected the concerns of, and were aimed at, the middle class, who in contrast to the majority of Mexicans in the city, was relatively well-off and prosperous in the 1920s. Protest resulted, however, whenever a member of the elite community experienced discrimination. When La Orquesta Típica, a local performing group, was denied rooms at a Galveston inn, or when El Club Mexico Bello could not rent good accommodations to hold their dances, *La Gaceta* printed poignant editorials denouncing the treatment of Mexicans.³⁸

Cultural activity, a sign that the barrios were beginning to stabilize, was evident soon after the immigrants first arrived and increased in tempo as the community grew larger. In 1914 a club made up of Mexican women constructed a float called the "Ship of Nations" for the annual Parade of Ships, an indication that some Mexicans were now participating in activities visible to the Anglo population. By 1917 Mexican organizations were able to sponsor large Fiestas Patrias celebrations, commemorating Mexico's independence from Spain. In September, two were held in the city sponsored by specially formed Comites Patrioticos, and the practice became a tradition. That same year, also, Patricio Gutierrez, a Mexican American born in San Antonio, became first pianist of the fledgling Houston Symphony Orchestra. Gutierrez, whose father was an itinerant musician, had studied music in New York under the sponsorship of an Anglo organization.

In 1920 Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, a musician and orchestra leader who enjoyed official favor during the regime of Porfirio Díaz, performed in Houston for the first time during Cinco de Mayo festivities. Lerdo de Tejada's "Orquesta Típica" played popular Mexican music in cities throughout the United States where the Mexican colonias were large enough to support his performances. He left Mexico after the overthrow of Díaz to make a living in the United States, basing himself in San Antonio.³⁹ In the days before radio and mass-produced records, traveling groups like Lerdo de Tejada's served to reinforce the Mexicans' passion for music, inspiring local imitations.

In 1919 a second mutual aid society was established in Magnolia. Prompted by the unexpected death of the wife of a local resident, a group of workers met to discuss the possibility of mutual life insurance and formed La Sociedad Benito Juárez, which differed from the Woodmen of the World primarily in its greater emphasis on Mexican-style cultural activity and ties to Mexico. The name of the organization was chosen because Benito Juárez, its namesake, "exemplified what heights a Mexican of pure Indian race could reach." La Sociedad became the primary center of activities in Magnolia until

1926 when the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church opened in order to serve the Mexicans of the area, giving the barrio a more focused identity. 40

The increasing sophistication of the Fiestas Patrias every September 15 (Mexican Independence Day) was one proof that the Mexican people of Houston had successfully adapted their culture to new surroundings. The 1923 celebrations, perhaps reflecting that the economy had recovered from the 1921 recession, were among the most impressive to be held in Houston, according to a Chronicle reporter who was delighted with the "happy festooned booths with red, white, and green . . . " and "brightly garbed señoritas, red roses in their hair and faint odor of perfume on their bodies." The 1925 fiestas were even more elaborate. They included a parade through downtown, baseball games, beauty contests, dances and speeches, dispersed throughout the barrios. 41 Separation from Mexico instilled in the immigrants a fierce nationalism, exemplified in 1928 when members of La Sociedad Benito Juárez, concerned that use of the Spanish language was declining among the young people of the colonia, hired Leonor Ancire to conduct Spanish classes so that children could "retain the language of their homeland" (la patria). Las Fiestas also evidenced these feelings, all the more so because many Mexicans considered their stay in the United States as temporary. Moreover, the celebrations provided the Mexicans, who could not relate to Anglo activities, a necessary diversion. 42

By the mid-twenties it became difficult to keep up with the number of new Mexican organizations that had proliferated in the city. Each one demonstrated the different techniques used by the immigrants to adapt to Houston. Through El Club Deportivo Azteca, baseball and soccer matches were organized. El Club México Bello allowed middle-class Mexican refugees and those aspiring to become middle-class to hold black-tie galas as they would have in Mexico. In addition, the club sponsored other functions that compared favorably with similar cultural events in Mexico such as debutante parties and country outings. For those interested in Spanish language theatre, La Cruz Azul Mexicana was producing plays in 1924, utilizing amateur actors from the community. La Sociedad Benito Juárez, which served the working class more than other groups, built a hall in 1928 to accommodate its activities which included dances, cultural performances, and fiestas patrias proceedings. 43

³⁸ Houston Post, January 21, 1979.

[&]quot;Houston Chronicle, September 30, 1914, September 17, 1917, May 7, 1920.

[&]quot;"Acta Primordial de la Sociedad Benito Juárez" (pamphlet, May 5, 1919), Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez (small collection), HMRC; "Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish" (church directory, February 1969) in the "Churches" vertical file, Texas and Local History Department, Houston Public Library.

⁴¹Houston Chronicle, September 16, 1923, September 17, 1925.

[&]quot;Reisler, By the Sweat of Their Brow, pp. 111-117; "Acta Primordial," Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez (small collection), HMRC. La Gaceta Mexicana, April 15, 1928.

[&]quot;Houston *Chronicle*, January 3, November 11, 1930; Houston *Post*, January 21, 1979; "Acta Primordial," Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez (small collection), HMRC, p. 2.

One of the most notable achievements of La Sociedad Benito Juárez was the formation of a brass band, which delighted in playing the popular, Mexican waltzes of the period as well as John Phillip Sousa's martial music. More than any other art form, music inspired local groups and individuals to creative heights. Among the immigrants arriving in the United States from Mexico during the period of the revolution were thousands of trained musicians who, torn from their sources of institutional support, lost little time in creating opportunities to practice their art. Consequently, in Houston as in other places, Mexican musical groups abounded, sponsored by churches, recreation societies, and organizations formed specifically for that purpose. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church had a marching band and even the Southern Pacific Railroad took advantage of the immigrants' bent for music and organized a company band made up mostly of Mexican workers.44 Probably the most talented musical group was La Orquesta Típica de Magnolia. a troupe styled after the famous orchestra of Miguel Lerdo de Teiada. who on previous occasions had played in Houston. The conductor, Albino Torres. who received his training in Mexico City, also was a pianist with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. The group's popularity spread throughout the Gulf Coast region, and they often traveled, performing and dancing to Mexican, Latin American, and Spanish popular music.45

Traveling professional entertainers and theatre companies which frequently came to Houston added to the cultural variety of the *colonia* and served to introduce the latest techniques and songs to local groups. By 1928 the newly opened Teatro Azteca, located near the downtown district, played host to many of these groups. La Compania Cotera, which featured the well-known actresses Virginia Fabregas and Angélica Méndez and produced classical *Siglo Oro* as well as contemporary drama, was the favorite of theatregoers. The most common forms of entertainment that came to El Teatro Azteca were professional singers such as Antonieta Lorca, *la muñequita* ("the little doll"), and vaudeville style acts. The Mexican *colonia* by the end of the twenties was large enough to support this varied activity which also served to reinforce culture, allowing Mexicans to make a less painful adaption to their new environment. 46

The 1930 census revealed that Mexicans, along with blacks, were the most disadvantaged ethnic group in Houston. The fifteen thousand Mexicans in the city lived in dilapidated housing, their educational level remained low, and they worked at the most menial jobs. Still, their record of achievement and survival was impressive. They proved to be resourceful, enterprising, and

imaginative. In spite of the many obstacles they encountered, by 1930 Mexicans in Houston made their culture and institutions a permanent feature of the city even though their ability to survive would be severely tested during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

When the Democratic Party held its 1928 national convention in Houston, the editors of La Gaceta Mexicana applauded the decision because of the many extra jobs that would be created "for our people who are increasingly seen idle in the streets." As elsewhere in the United States, the economy of Houston had cooled down, while immigration from Mexico continued unabated. The labor market of the city, except for a brief hiatus in 1921, had absorbed Mexican workers as fast as they arrived. By the end of the decade. however, it was saturated. Companies had long ceased sending enganchistas to San Antonio to recruit Mexicans because now they arrived in Houston on their own. The sight of thousands of unemployed Mexicans, however, aggravated the anxiety caused by the plummeting economy, unnerving many Americans who called for an end to immigration. In the late twenties, the Border Patrol. established in 1924, started to enforce the entry laws more rigidly. In the Houston-Galveston area, Mexicans, whose labor had been assiduously courted in the past, became unwanted.47 A worker in Galveston, who wrote to a relative in San Luis Potosí during November 1930, gave this account of conditions in the area:

It seems that the American gentlemen want to expel us from their country because they have kicked out many Mexicans, whether or not they have a passport. Some because they have entered illegally, others because they do not have work. It seems that they are determined not to give us work and there are so many poverty stricken people that it is frightening. . . .

Only those of us who do not have the money to return are staying in the country. Soon, however, we will again be in your midst.⁴⁸

As a result of this atmosphere, during the early period of the economic crisis many of the unemployed residents in the *colonia* decided to return to Mexico on their own. Single men or recently arrived immigrants who had not

⁴⁴ Ibid.; El Tecolote, May 1930.

[&]quot;La Gaceta Mexicana, n.d. (ca. 1928); Houston Chronicle, May 5, 1932; Houston Press, September 16, 1933.

⁴⁶La Gaceta Mexicana, February 15, April 15, 1928.

⁴⁷Ibid., February 15, 1928; for a description of the Great Depression in Houston, see McComb, Houston, pp. 167-205; Abraham Hoffman, Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression, Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), pp. 26-36; M. Martinez, "Competition for Mexican Labor: The Texas Emigrant Labor Act of 1929" (seminar paper, Department of History, University of Houston, 1978).

⁴⁸Victoriano Rodríguez to Juana Jaureguí, November 7, 1930, Rodríguez Family Collection, HMRC.

yet settled into the Houston environment were usually the first to return. As conditions worsened and more Mexicans lost their jobs, entire families left for home.⁴⁹

Throughout Houston, the deepening crisis brought insecurity and hardship to thousands of families regardless of ethnic background. For the first time since the recession of 1921, Houston workers had to go on mass relief; and a Houston movie house sponsored "jobothons" where donors, instead of pledging money, promised to hire unemployed men to do odd jobs in return for food, clothing, or occasionally, money. Additionally, the cities of Houston, Pasadena, and Galveston pooled their resources and formed the Tri-City Relief Association, creating soup kitchens. Hundreds of World War I veterans from Houston joined the ill-fated Bonus Army in Washington, hoping to receive their bonuses early. 50

Unfortunately for Mexicans, the measures initiated to help the unemployed in these hard times were of little or no help. In publicizing the job program the Houston *Chronicle* made it clear that jobs should go to white Americans only. The last straw occurred when the Tri-City Relief Agency refused to provide assistance to Mexicans and Negroes when it ran short of funds in 1932. The churches and the Rusk Settlement House provided some relief to Mexicans, but it was not sufficient to meet the needs of an accelerating number of destitute families in the *colonia*.⁵¹ Early in 1932, a group of residents from El Segundo Barrio met at the Rusk Settlement House and, under the leadership of Bartolemé Casa, created El Club Pro-Repatriación in order to help their countrymen return to Mexico. After a series of fund raising efforts, which included mock bullfights, the club bought a truck to transport those wishing to return. Eventually, city officials stepped in. Police rounded up and jailed Mexican aliens by the hundreds who did not carry proper documents, and the federal government deported them.⁵²

Since the oil industry did not fare as badly as others, Houston was spared much of the severity that characterized hard times in other cities. For that reason, repatriation hysteria did not result in the massive deportations of Mexicans that occurred in Los Angeles where people were returned to Mexico by

the trainloads.⁵³ Still, this contrast was probably of little consolation to those who underwent the ordeal. Considering the conditions of the city, many Mexicans welcomed their deportation from Houston. The Mexican government promised to provide them with transportation from the border towns into the interior of Mexico and to provide them with free land upon arrival. This hope turned into a cruel hoax for most, however, because Mexico, faced with an avalanche of returning expatriates, could not live up to these promises.⁵⁴

Increasing racism compounded the anxiety experienced by members of the Houston Mexican community. During the early part of 1932 alone, law enforcement officers shot and killed three Mexicans in actions that raised the ire and suspicion of the *colonia* residents. One case in which a city detective shot a robbery suspect in the back was such an irresponsible act that the Mexican Consul in Houston brought lawyers in from San Antonio to help prosecute the case. In spite of the eyewitness testimony of nine Mexicans who swore that twenty-seven year old Federico Valdez was shot without provocation, a grand jury still no-billed the officers.⁵⁵

During the depression, the decade of the twenties seemed to Mexicans like halcyon days. Even though Mexican workers occupied the lowest rungs of the occupation ladder during the 1920s, receiving low and inadequate wages, their collective earning power made possible the multitude of cultural activities and the creation of barrio institutions. They met the challenge of survival as long as they could find employment. During the 1930s, Las Fiestas Patrias were celebrated in the *colonia* as had become customary; but the activities did not compare to the elaborate ceremonies that had marked the event during the 1920s. They discontinued the usual downtown parade of gaily decorated floats and shiny, new cars. Funds for the event had traditionally been raised by selling to the working people of the *colonia* votes which were then cast for favorite candidates to become Queen of the Fiestas. In the early 1930s, this practice was discontinued because of the Depression. Since so many of its members were unemployed and could not pay their dues, in 1932 La Sociedad Benito Juárez lost its hall which it had so proudly inaugurated four years earlier. La Gaceta Mexicana ceased publishing because of lack of funds, and other newspapers published only sporadically. 56

^{**}Guadalupe González, interview with author in Houston in 1975. In a study I conducted on the effect of the Depression in East Chicago, Indiana, this was also the case; see Rosales, "Mexicanos in Indiana Harbor During the 1920s: From Prosperity to Depression," La Revista Chicano Riqueña, Vol. 4 (Fall 1976), pp. 88-98.

[&]quot;Houston Chronicle contained articles on the plight of workers almost daily. Spot checks for March, April, and May, 1932.

[&]quot;McComb, Houston, p. 168; Tsanoff, Neighborhood Doorways, pp. 27-28; Valdez, The History of the Missionary Catechists, p. 15.

¹²Houston Chronicle, May 13, 1932.

⁵³McComb, *Houston*, p. 168; Guadalupe Gonzalez, interview; Rosales, "Mexicanos in Indiana Harbor," pp. 97-98; Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression*, pp. 100-101.

³⁴Hoffman, Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression, pp. 133-150.

⁵⁵ Houston Chronicle, April 4, 27, May 5, 12, 1932.

[&]quot;Houston Chronicle, September 16, 1931, May 5, 1932, September 16, 1934; "Paisaje Histórico de la Sociedad Benito Juárez" (program, 1969), Sociedad Mutalista Benito Juárez (small collection), HMRC. Rios, "Towards a True Chicano Bibliography," pp. 22-36.

Ironically, in Houston the events of the Depression served to strengthen the ties of those resident Mexicans who survived the ordeal. New Deal programs, for example, such as the National Youth Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps, brought Americanizing influences into the barrios and exposed many young people to life outside of the *colonia*. The Works Progress Administration which employed thousands of Houstonians in public works projects also introduced a number of Mexican adults to government work. Since WPA employment was restricted to United States citizens only, the benefits of being naturalized became painfully apparent to those excluded from this project.⁵⁷ Additionally, by the 1930s a generation of native Houstonians of Mexican descent was growing up in Houston. Unlike their immigrant parents who viewed their stay as temporary, these young people had no direct ties to Mexico; and the decrease in immigration during the economic crisis put an end to the constant cultural renewal which characterized the 1920s.

Representative of this new breed of Mexican Americans was Felix Tijerina who, as a pioneer of modifying Mexican culture to Anglo tastes, became one of the most successful restaurateurs in Houston by the 1950s. Originally from Sugarland, an agricultural community adjacent to Houston and from a family of farm workers, he fulfilled the Horatio Alger ideal. As a boy he worked in Houston restaurants, learned to read English from menus, and discovered what modifications Mexican food had to undergo to make it palatable to Anglos. His first restaurant went broke after the Crash of 1929; but with the recovery, he opened a Mexican restaurant in the stylish Montrose area of Houston. Its success led eventually to establishing a chain, all displaying the familiar "Felix's" signs through the city. 58

The significance of Tijerina's role in the history of Houston's Mexican community was only partially related to his role as an entrepreneur. Collectively, he and other members of his class started to assert themselves in a city that allowed only marginal participation from Mexicans. In 1935 the Latin American Club (LAC) was formed in Houston by Tijerina, Juvencio Rodríguez, a city employee, Manuel Crespo, a mortician from Spain, and John Duhig, a lawyer, with the expressed purpose of integrating Mexican Americans into Anglo society. Of primary concern to the group was the registration of the ten thousand eligible Mexican American voters believed to live in Houston.⁵⁹ In addition to this major aspiration, the LAC, which eventually became Council 60 of the nationwide League of United Latin American Citizens, confronted other issues as they arose. For example, in June 1937,

Elpidio Cortez died mysteriously while incarcerated for a minor offense, and the LAC applied enough pressure on city officials to have two policemen indicted for murder. The officers were acquitted, but the LAC saw the trial as a moral victory.⁶⁰

In another struggle the LAC forced city councilman S. A. Starskey, who had made a crude remark concerning Mexican workers in the city's water department, to apologize to the Mexican community. The Water Department had a crew made up of Mexican workers who, although employed all year, did not receive the same civil service benefits awarded other city employees. In May 1938, the workers organized a protest when they were not paid for a regular city holiday in commemoration of the Battle of San Jacinto. Commissioner Starskey responded to the workers' request to be paid by stating that he did not see why they should pay the Mexicans to take off in commemoration of the day that they were defeated. The Latin American Club, by now a LULAC chapter, rose to the occasion and eventually wrested an apology from Starskey. 61 More important was the status of the Mexican employees of the city. John Duhig, the LAC attorney, had been attempting for a year through legal maneuvering to obtain permanent status for the Mexicans in the Water Department. Some of the city employees, in fact, belonged to the LAC, and the Houston Post published an incisive letter to the editor from John J. Herrera, who later became a lawyer, deploring the Starskey statement. He praised the contributions of Mexicans in Texas' struggle for independence, and in World War I, and prophetically predicted their willingness to fight in future wars. 62

The attention paid to democratic ideals by United States politicians in the years of the Fascist threat in Europe helped the Houston Mexican community. Reflecting the new activist role of Houston's Mexican leadership was the newspaper, *El Puerto*. Its language marked a clear departure from that of earlier publications. While denouncing Fascist Spain, the publisher A. D. "Sal" Salazar, editorialized about the importance of citizenship in a democratic society, pointing out that these citizens had rights as well as obligations. The Latin American clubs in Houston ought to be aware of these implications, according to Salazar, and should strive to improve the lot of the Hispanics, to defend their rights, and not simply deal with recreational needs. 63

[&]quot;Houston Scrapbook: Houston Civil Defense and Houston Industries, Vol. 24, Texas and Local History Department, HPL; Tsanoff, Neighborhood Doorways, pp. 27-28.

[&]quot;Felix Tijerina Family Collection, HMRC.

[&]quot;Constitution of the Latin American Club (pamphlet, n.d.); ibid., newspaper clippings.

⁶⁰ Ibid.; Houston Post, June 4, 1937.

⁶¹Newspaper clippings, Juvencio Rodríguez Collection, HMRC.

⁶² Ibid.; Houston Post, May 10, 1938.

⁶³El Puerto, July 22, 1938.

Conspicuous in the ideology of Mexican organizations and institutions in Houston during the late 1930s was a desire to gain acceptance as "Americans of Latin American descent" by convincing the Anglo that they deserved such recognition. No other issue demonstrated this need for accommodation more than the successful campaign to have Mexicans categorized as Caucasians by the federal government. The 1930 census had placed Mexicans in the same racial classification as Asians and American Indians, and when the Social Security Act created old age insurance in 1936, employers were asked to fill out the forms for their Mexican workers accordingly. National LULAC then spearheaded a drive to correct what was considered an affront to the "dignity of Latin Americans" insisting that Mexicans belonged "to the white race having descended from the Spanish." Houston members of the Latin American Club enthusiastically joined in this effort, sending letters to their congressmen indicating that "we are NOT a yellow race, and we protest being classified as such."64 This attitude contrasted with views expressed in La Gaceta Mexicana, which in the previous decade extolled the virtues of nosotros los indios, or the pride that La Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez felt for its namesake, who as a "pure Indian" won a lofty place in his country's history. 65 The older generation reached adulthood during the Mexican Revolution and, regardless of whether or not they supported the revolutionary regimes, internalized the ideology which became an integral part of the struggle. Their children, on the other hand, were reared in Houston and took their cues from the dominant Anglo society. The extreme discrimination experienced by Negroes and Mexicans during the Great Depression convinced them that in the United States it did not pay to be "colored." Congressman Joe Eagle reinforced this tendency in a 1936 published telegram to Social Security Board Director Frank Bane. In that message Eagle publicly supported the efforts of the LAC by implying that Mexicans deserved to be classified as whites because "these people are as entirely fellow citizens as any other group. They are loyal to the American Flag. They have intense pride and patriotism."66

When World War II broke out, Mexicans in Houston had ample opportunity to demonstrate that they deserved to be Americans. The first Houston casualty of the war was Joe Pedilla, a young Navy recruit killed in the South

Pacific, and hundreds of Houstonians of Mexican descent served in the struggles. In 1944 La Sociedad Fraternal, which originated in 1939, published a pamphlet honoring fifty-five of their members who had served in the military in the course of the war including three who had been killed. The organization also sold war bonds to its members in the spirit of the war effort. In general, Mexican Americans in Houston pointed with pride to their wartime contributions, and understandably they viewed the awarding of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Macario Garcia, a Mexican immigrant raised in Sugarland, as their crowning achievement. While a soldier fighting the Germans, Garcia was cited for heroic action in 1944.67

Experiences in World War II brought a sharpened awareness of their status as Americans to the city's Mexican population. During and after the war, leaders in the community pursued their struggle for civil rights with a new vigor. LULAC Council 60 became a major spokesman for returning Mexican American servicemen after the end of the war. In 1946 the national convention of LULAC was held in Houston, and the major theme running through the meeting was the discrimination that persisted after the war. ⁶⁸ Hundreds of Mexican American servicemen encountered prejudice and rejection throughout Texas, sometimes while still in uniform. They were denied service in restaurants and discriminated against in employment. In one case, the remains of a Mexican soldier who was killed in the South Pacific were denied burial in an all-white cemetery. ⁶⁹

The October 1945 issue of LULAC News, sponsored by Council 60 of Houston, railed against such prejudice and discrimination especially since "'Mexicans' have just finished helping this country to defeat countries . . . who would impose upon the world a superior culture." Macario Garcia's heroism was brandished on every possible public occasion, almost as if to remind the Anglo population of the city "that we have proven ourselves true and loyal Americans by every trial and test that has confronted us." LULAC members and later the G. I. Forum, an organization composed exclusively of Mexican American veterans, became a more assertive voice for the Houston Mexican society of the late 1940s and early 1950s. They demanded "social, political, and economic equality and the opportunity to practice and enjoy that equality." More importantly, the new political generation expected these

[&]quot;Juvencio Rodríguez to Senators Tom Connally, Morris Shephard, and Congressman Joe H. Eagle, November 25, 1936, Juvencio Rodríguez Collection, HMRC.

[&]quot;'Ibid.; "Acta Primordial," Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez (small collection), HMRC; La Gaceta Mexicana, April 15, May 1, September 9, 1928.

[&]quot;Ibid.; Joe H. Eagle to Director of Social Security Board Frank Bane (telegram), November 25, 1936, Social Security Board to Joe H. Eagle (telegram), November 28, 1936, J. Rodriguez Collection, HMRC; ibid., newspaper clippings.

⁶Newspaper clipping, n.d., J. Rodríguez Collection, HMRC; *Quinto Aniversario* (pamphlet, 1944), Sociedad Union Fraternal Collection, HMRC; "Medal of Honor Winner Guest of LULAC," *LULAC News*, Vol. 12 (October 1945), p.15.

^{68&}quot;Editorial," LULAC News, p. 5.

⁶⁹Acuña, Occupied America, pp. 198-199; Carl Allsup, "A Soldier's Burial," La Revista Chicano Riqueña, Vol. 4 (Fall 1976), pp. 77-87.

prerogatives "... not as a favor, but as a delegated right guaranteed by our Constitution, and as a reward for our faithful service."

The postwar generation needed confidence if solutions to the problems that persisted in the barrios were to be solved. Many young Chicanos acquired experiences in the military that helped them gain access to areas of Houston society that had been closed to their parents. Louis Kestenberg, a retired University of Houston professor, recalled that among the returning veterans who took advantage of the G. I. Bill education benefits were numerous Mexican Americans who "took classes, did well and are now in leadership positions in the community." For those fortunate enough to acquire an education or trade. Houston in the late 1940s and 1950s offered more opportunity. Wartime demands had greatly expanded the petrochemical industry of the city. creating more jobs. As a consequence, in contemporary Houston, Chicanos work in almost every facet of the city's booming economy. Unfortunately, at the end of the war the majority of Mexican Americans in Houston, many in residence since the 1920s, still did menial labor. Today, an inordinate number of them, especially recent arrivals from Mexico and south Texas, work at low paying jobs that often result in poverty, poor housing, inadequate health care, and low educational attainment.71

Inferior public schools in the barrios also continue to be a source of concern. As late as the 1940s, the community considered its segregated schools to be of such inferior quality that a boycott was organized by a group of concerned parents who established an alternative school in the Benito Juárez Hall. Faculty members who had fallen into disfavor with administration officials were many times assigned to Chicano schools. Understandably, this situation resulted in frustration for teachers, students, and parents alike. Throughout the 1940s, youth gangs and violence resulted from a combination of inadequate education facilities as well as cultural erosion in the *colonia*. One barrio in the Second Ward known as *El Alacrán* ("the Scorpion") was notorious for its violence. Supposedly, the members of its dominant gang conspicuously tatooed a scorpion on their arms.⁷²

By 1945 the Mexican community seemed better organized to effect change in the school system. Through the leadership of Dr. John Ruiz, a local physician, the community convinced the school system to build a new school in Magnolia to replace the dilapidated structures which had been condemned by city inspectors. The concern over education also prompted the Houston chapter of LULAC in 1957 to start the "Little Schools of 400" throughout Texas. As national president of LULAC, Felix Tijerina, the Houston restaurateur, was instrumental in gaining state support for this program which was an early prototype of the Project Head Start Program introduced during the 1960s. The issue of adequate schools in Houston for minorities continues to this day, however, and contemporary leaders consider this problem to be one of the most vexing. Indeed, a recent ruling by the Houston Independent School District board requiring the children of undocumented workers to pay a monthly tuition has discouraged attendance by an estimated ten thousand children in the city."

Relations with the police department have unfortunately remained as they were in the 1920s and 1930s. The most blatant example of police brutality in the history of Houston occurred as recently as 1977 when four uniformed policemen were accused (later convicted) of throwing an unarmed Joe Campos Torres into a Houston bayou where he drowned. The aftermath of this case has left the Chicano population embittered and suspicious of the police department.

In spite of these problems, the last thirty years in Houston have seen a rapid assimilation of Chicanos into the mainstream. Many have moved from the barrios into the suburbs, integrating previously all-Anglo neighborhoods. Even for those who remained in the barrios acculturation eroded the older traditions and values which up until the 1940s the majority of Mexicans in the colonia rigidly maintained. The beginnings of this change, however, first occurred in the 1930s. An article in *El Tecolote* described the festivities of El Cinco de Mayo and noted that the young Mexicans were more interested in the swing music at a dance than they were in the traditional proceedings. World War II accelerated the *colonia*'s adoption of Anglo culture, and in the next decade Mexican Americans became more attuned to living in the United States than ever before.⁷⁴

In the 1950s, publication of the old newspaper *El Puerto* resumed, this time printed in English. It emphasized society news; but, unlike the descriptions that appeared in the earlier newspapers, the cultural activities reflected

¹⁶Houston Post, September 15, 1945; "Editorial," LULAC News, p. 5.

[&]quot;Mary Ellen Goodman, "A Preliminary Report on Project Latin American" (pamphlet, November 1966), Louis Kestenberg, interview with author in Houston in 1978; Rosales, "What is the Status of Minorities in Employment?" (paper delivered at the Work Ethic Conference, San Antonio, 1976); Joseph L. Zarefsky, "Spanish-Americans in Houston and Harris County" (Research Bureau Community Council pamphlet, September 1953).

[&]quot;Cano, "Dissertation Proposal," pp. 7-8; Alberta Villa Gomez, "The Origins of El Alacrán: A Mexican Barrio in Houston," (seminar paper, Department of History, University of Houston, 1979).

[&]quot;Cano, "Dissertation Proposal," pp. 7-8; Alfred J. Hernández, "The Little School of the 400," LULAC Golden Anniversary: Fifty Years of Serving Hispanics, 1929-1979, LULAC Collection, HMRC.

¹⁴Mark Madera et al., The Barrios, Mexican Americans in Houston (n.p., February 1971), pp. 40-41; El Tecolote, May 15, 1938, Melesio Gomez Collection, HMRC.

the American tastes of the *colonia*. Stories about rock and roll dances, beatnik dress parties, and a general "Happy Days" atmosphere filled the pages of this newspaper. The publication reflected the interests of the growing Chicano middle class of Houston more than the conditions of the less affluent, but then, so had the publications of the 1920s which were markedly more Mexican.⁷⁵

Houston Mexican American leaders also entered the Anglo political establishment in the postwar period. In Texas, minorities had long been denied equal access to the ballot box; but, during the 1950s, working within the Democratic Party, Chicanos were able to break down some of the barriers. During the late 1950s, local residents organized the Civic Action Committee, which later became Viva Kennedy Clubs. It coalesced Chicanos into a formidable organization that was able to deliver votes and obtain political concessions. After John F. Kennedy was elected, he visited with Houston Mexican American leaders as a sign of recognition of their support. The Civic Action Committee changed its name to the Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations (PASO), and from this group Leonel Castillo and Ben Reyes emerged as two of the most successful Chicano politicians. 76 At the same time, a more nationalistic and radical movement has, in very recent years, made inroads into the Chicano community. Led by young activists usually from the university setting, the "Movement" people have, ironically, rejected ideals and aspirations that have been evolving in Houston since the 1930s. La Raza Unida Party has been one of the most important forums for this position in Houston, and in 1974 Raza Unida candidates garnered such a large number of votes in local elections that it forced the traditional PASO politicians to reassess their goals.77

Houston is now experiencing a large influx of Mexican immigrants who will eventually outnumber the community of Chicanos whose historical development this essay has addressed. The new arrivals are moving into the same barrios where their predecessors settled in the 1920s, and the influx is so great that what used to be large but individual pockets of Chicanos in the inner city is now one gigantic barrio stretching along both sides of the ship channel.

One of the largest concentrations of Mexican immigrants in the nation currently resides in Houston, and they face conditions remarkably similar to those faced by the young Mexican immigrants who in 1908 started El Campo Laurel.

[&]quot;El Puerto, September, October, November 1959, February 1960.

⁷⁶⁰ Bulletin Civic Action Committee' (fliers, January 1959, September 1960), Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations Collection, HMRC; "Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations, Harris County" (pamphlet, 1963), Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations Collection, HMRC.

[&]quot;Eddic Canales, interview with author in Houston in 1980 and Tatcho Mindiola, interview with author in Houston in 1980; see Bert Buzan and Diana Buder Phillips, "Institutional Completeness and Chicano Militaney," Aztlan, Vol. II (Spring 1980), pp. 33-64.

F. Arturo Rosales is Assistant Professor of History at Arizona State University and executive director of the Association of Southwestern Humanities Council, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.