



## THE LETTER FROM CHAPULTEPEC

BY THOMAS H. KRENECK

Mexican American organizations emerged in Houston, Texas, as early as 1908, but by the 1920s and '30s social, mutual aid, religious, and political groups proliferated. While men ran most of these community associations with "auxiliary" participation from their wives, by the 1930s women's groups began to take root. One of the earliest of these was Club Femenino Chapultepec.

Club Chapultepec began in Houston in 1931 and lasted until the mid-1940s. With about twenty-four active members, it operated as part of the Business and Professional Department of the YWCA. Founded by and composed of unmarried women in their late teens and early twenties, most of the group had come to Houston as children with their parents after 1910. Specifically, the club drew its membership from the ranks of Houston's small, rather conservative, aspiring Mexican American middle class. They were young women interested in working in Houston's vibrant business community.<sup>1</sup>

While the club provided its members with a recreational outlet, it also was involved in raising the consciousness of their families in regard to the larger Houston society, as well as educating the city's Anglo community about Mexican culture. Pursuant to these goals, Club Chapultepec sponsored activities which ranged from the Sixteenth of September fiestas to promoting the sale of government bonds during World War II.<sup>2</sup>

Although the effect of the Great Depression was apparently less dramatic in Houston than in other areas of the nation, the city's Mexican American community underwent severe hardships. By the mid-1930s Mexican Houstonians found themselves in a different condition than they had been during the prosperous 1920s. It was amid this condition and immediately after the 1937 trial of two Houston police officers for the death of a Mexican national named Elpidio Cortez that the women of the Club Chapultepec met and summarized

<sup>1</sup>Melesio Gomez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*; Mrs. Estella Gomez Reyes, interview with author in Houston on June 15, 1979.

the problems of their people in a ten-point letter of grievance which two of the leading members composed, signed, and sent to the appropriate agencies.<sup>3</sup>

The letter speaks for itself, but it contains points worthy of special mention. The purpose of the letter was positive — a sincere desire to find ways to work toward alleviation of difficulties encountered by Texans of Mexican descent. It is an early manifesto identifying those inequalities through the eyes of young Mexican American women. Moreover, it illustrates the difficult balance which these ladies had to maintain between cultural retention and assimilation.

Without stating so specifically, the letter was prompted by the Cortez affair. The date of June 11, 1937, on the document was more than coincidental — the trial of the two policemen had ended in their acquittal the previous week (note grievance 9). The group's action may also have resulted in part from the celebration of the Texas Centennial the year before, as the list of complaints begins and concludes with references to the use of Texas history. This document provides testimony to the connection between our perceptions of the past and the meaningful present. The letter from Chapultepec is proof that the *colonia* in the 1930s was assessing its condition within Houston society.<sup>4</sup>

[Author's Note: The following letter is printed exactly as the original except for explanatory notes.]

June 11, 1937

Miss Leona B. Hendrix<sup>5</sup>  
2219 Tracy Street  
Kansas City, Missouri

My dear Miss Hendrix:

The Chapultepec Club of the Houston Y.W.C.A. has the following to offer as findings from their study of minorities. Here in Texas they [the club members] happen to constitute a minority group themselves and are called Mexicans. Some of the group were born in Mexico and have not taken out citizenship papers. [The] reason [is as] follows: Many were born in Texas and are therefore American citizens but are still called Mexicans. The group is made up of an excellent cross section of the Mexican colony in Houston. There are several high school graduates in the group and of course every year more Mexicans are staying in school until graduation.

These are the problems which these young Mexican girls and women face in Texas and they wonder what the future will be for them and their children. From this study, they hope sincerely for recommendations from the National B. & P. Council on action they can take to better understanding, respect and opportunity. They recognize that minority groups elsewhere in the United States face some, though not all, of the same problems.

<sup>3</sup>Minutes of Club Chapultepec, Melesio Gomez Family Collection, HMRC.

<sup>4</sup>The letter is part of the Melesio Gomez Family Collection.

<sup>5</sup>Leona B. Hendrix was probably an area representative of the National Business and Professional Girls Council in Kansas City.

1. Texas is next door to Mexico and there are border town problems to be considered, historically as well as at present.  
Texas history is founded on troubles, oft created by Texans, to get land and cattle from the Mexican people. [N]ow the problem of stolen automobiles is causing the same problem and also the water power of the Rio Grande River is causing hard feelings.
2. Texas cannot, due to Chamber of Commerce and patriotic society activities, forget that Texas lost a tragic battle at the [A]lamo in San Antonio and won a battle at San Jacinto. This causes teachers to preach a patriotism not kind to Mexican children. Mexicans have been known to stay out of school [in Houston] when that part of history was being taught because of abuses inflicted by pupils and even teachers.
3. Mexicans in [a] desire to get ahead have at times denied their nationality calling themselves French, Italian, and Spanish. This induces the Mexican colony's disfavor. Nationalistic spirit [is] being cultured at present [and] this of course can be as dangerous an attitude as the denial [of] one.  
If they should move back to Mexico they are considered traitors for having lived in Texas.
4. They do not take out citizenship papers because those who have are still called Mexicans and treated as such.
5. The Mexican people find it impossible to rent or buy in any decent section of town and are forced to live in dirty crowded conditions in houses out of which Americans have moved.
6. Playgrounds and parks show distinct distaste to their presence on them and in some cases they are ordered off or forbidden on. This problem is caused by the youth and not the recreation leaders.
7. Falsely accused of many crimes in the city and because of some difficulty with the English language they are taken advantage of frequently.
8. Mexican people are paid less in wages on all jobs and a great many jobs and industries are closed to them.
9. Mexican lawyers receive no respect from other lawyers nor even from our judges. It is a well known fact that a case is practically lost if a

Mexican lawyer handles it. Justice is very one-sided, and they have had some rather serious cases recently.

10. They are called "brown people," "greasers," et cetera and of course want to be called white.

This letter is also going to Beatrice Langley and at the same time the group is also sending a letter to the American Youth Congress protesting certain movies which have been shown in Texas portraying the Mexicans in a very bad light.<sup>6</sup>

Very truly yours,  
Stella Quintenella  
Carmen Cortez  
Olive Lewis

P.S. These statements were verified by outstanding men in the Mexican colony, such as the consul, doctors, and teachers.

<sup>6</sup>The fourth annual American Youth Congress met in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in July 1937, and was concerned with the race issue, especially in regard to blacks.