

El Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello: Raza, Patria, e Idioma

By Adriana Castro



Club México Bello celebrated holidays in style, as this Cinco de Mayo coronation in 1938 at the City Auditorium illustrates. Dorothy Farrington (Dr. Dorothy Caram), the child to the left of the queen, and her brother Phillip Farrington, at right, carried the queen's train with help from the little girl sitting next to Phillip.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Dorothy Caram.

Dressed in elegant floor-length gowns and formal white suits, men, women, and children, flanked by flags from the United States and Mexico, crowded together for a picture in 1938. At the center stood the queen, holding a scepter and wearing an extravagant crown. This magnificent scene was captured at an event hosted by Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello, which became a model for many local Mexican American organizations. Still operating today, Club México Bello reached success and fame among Houstonians by creating a familiar environment for Mexican immigrants and introducing Mexican culture to non-Mexicans. It made a lasting imprint on Houston's Mexican American community, by giving Mexican Americans an opportunity to attend sophisticated social events and present themselves as outstanding citizens to the Houston community.

Club México Bello traces its origins to 1924 when ten men from Houston's Hispanic community formed a social club to fulfill a want that can only be described as "nostalgia for their native country." The club's goal was to maintain Mexico's culture for immigrants living in Houston. As

historian Arnolde de León writes, "[T]hrough 'México Bello' the traditions and customs of the mother country would be preserved and the name of Mexico kept sound and safe." In 1974 Reverend David Adame wrote a history of Club México Bello for the fiftieth anniversary in which he outlined the club's initial goals: "The idea of that club was to get as many people together with the idea of maintaining the Hispanic culture that they had brought from Mexico and to integrate with the Anglo society."¹

From the name "México Bello" we can also see that the founders wanted to portray a positive image of their "Beautiful Mexico" not only to Houston's Latino community but also to its white community. Rev. Adame describes the humble beginnings of Club México Bello, saying, "They ventured to go and try to socialize with the Anglo community. The purpose of the club was to not only gather the people within the Hispanic community, but to get acquainted with the Anglo community and be part of the city of Houston. So they organized by having a party in one house and then another party in another house."²



Club México Bello opened the doors of its clubhouse on Shearn to other cultural clubs and LULAC, in keeping with its mission to serve as a cultural outlet in the Mexican and Mexican American community. Club members also projected an elegant and sophisticated image of Mexicans to Houston's Anglo community. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0282-072-0006.

The need to form an organization of like-minded individuals of Mexican heritage can also be ascribed to ongoing discrimination or, as Rev. Adame phrases it, “misunderstand[ing[s],” that Mexicans faced in the 1920s. With this in mind the founders believed Club México Bello would benefit the Mexican American community. De León explains “Thus, cultural activities would be vehicles by which stereotypes and prejudice might be combated, and to that end, Club ‘México Bello’ in 1927 began holding formal black and white dances in prominent halls as an effort to display the ‘proper behavior’ of Mexicans. Once Anglos saw Mexicans for what they were, they would accept mexicanos on their own terms, according to this logic.” This carried distinct similarities to activities by African Americans also seeking racial uplift by setting an example of proper behavior to achieve equality.³

Among the club’s founders were Isidro García and Alejandro Martínez, the group’s first president. Dr. Dorothy Caram describes the founders, including her grandfather, as “prominent business and professional men, many of whom had fled Mexico after 1909. Many came to Houston in the early ’20s since there was still a lot of political turmoil in Mexico. My grandfather, Col. Felipe Santander came to Houston in early 1924 and brought my mother, Elena Santander, who was fifteen years old, and his wife, Luisa

The club’s officers worked diligently to overcome community prejudice toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans and maintain their cultural heritage.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0330-0011.



Lopez de Santander.” Many members were, as de León notes, “attracted to the club primarily because of its emphasis on *lo mexicano*. Others were of more prominence, attracted by its cultural and nationalistic theme.” The club started out for men only, and those of Mexican descent actively sought membership because “the club clearly represented the most popular organization in the colonia, a who’s who of young, aspiring Hispanic Houston.”⁴

The men began hosting parties, with the help of their wives, at each other’s houses, but neighbors often complained to the police that the club’s parties were too noisy. The police then told the club members to quiet down or stop the party. Rev. Adame recalls one of these parties where Mayor Oscar Holcombe was present:

On one of these occasions, when the Mayor was a guest, and the party was in full swing, a representative of the police department appeared and said, “Look, we are told that you are making a lot of noise, and we want you all to take your stuff out, and shut down your party and let’s have some quiet.” When the Mayor heard what the police were telling the president of the club, he came out and he said, “There is no noise, everything is calm, and this party is not going to close. If you want to come on in and join us, you are welcome.” From what I understand, the police

*came in and also enjoyed the party. There was no such thing as being loud; it was just that the neighbors didn’t like the idea of the Hispanics having a party and having such a good time when they didn’t know how.”*⁵

In 1927 Club México Bello began holding its annual Black and White balls, elegant dances that took place in polished ballrooms with guests dressed in formal attire. Members strictly enforced a dress code of long, formal, black or white evening gowns for the women and black tuxedos with black bowties for the men — no exceptions. During the summer, Club México Bello also organized Pink and White balls. Like the Black and White balls, the dress code was strict with ladies in pink dresses and men in white tuxedos. Dr. Caram recalls, “Even if a man showed up [to the Black and White ball] in a black tuxedo and his shirt was not pure white he couldn’t come in.” She adds, “Sometimes they were sent back home because this is part of the rules, part of the regulations. This is tradition, and the club has wanted to keep it that way.”⁶ This policy may seem a bit rigid, but it was in tune with the club’s goal to put forth the best image of Mexicans to the Houston community, especially the Anglo community. The dress code proved successful, enabling Club México Bello to integrate many of Houston’s elegant dance halls with their Black and White balls.

El Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello formed in Houston in 1924 to maintain the members’ Mexican culture – offering a little bit of home away from home – and to dispell prejudice. The motto “raza, patria, e idioma” means “race, country, and language.”

Photo courtesy of Dr. Dorothy Caram.





Although women had been involved with planning events and supporting the club at large, they formed Club Femenino México Bello in 1954 as a women's auxiliary. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0108-033.

De León recounts how the dance impressed the owner of the Aragon ballroom in the 1930s: “For their annual Black and White ball... the Club’s officers went to the skeptical owner of the Aragon ballroom (in downtown Houston, 1010 Rusk), who, wary of Mexicans desecrating the salon, asked them for a steep deposit and other assurances. Once they gained his cautious approval for using the Aragon, the membership impressed the proprietor so deeply by their dress and comportment that he freely confessed afterwards: ‘We Anglos have much to learn from Mexicans.’ With that singular demonstration of behavior... were torn down racial barriers and thenceforth, Mexicans had access to the rest of Houston’s elegant ballrooms in the best hotels or those privately owned.”⁷

México Bello also hosted Debutante balls or annual quinceañeras starting in 1958 to provide young girls an opportunity to make their debut into society with stylish elegance. Dressed in lavish white dresses, the debutantes were escorted by young men in black tuxedos. The lucky girl crowned queen of the ball received a crown and scepter. The club hosted these balls, which included members of other local Mexican American organizations, so Hispanic girls in the community could enjoy an extravagant party whether or not her family could afford a quinceañera.⁸

México Bello also undertook many philanthropic efforts to better Houston’s Latin American community. In its Official Charter of 1937, it stated its main purpose: “This club is formed for the support of benevolent, charitable and educational undertakings, being more particularly for the purpose of encouraging and promoting matters and undertakings of public interest and for civic benefit to the

City of Houston, Texas, and for the purpose of rendering benevolence and charity to such persons as may from time to time be found to be in need of such benevolence and charity, and to assist worthy persons to become educated in



The front and back of these colorful programs from the Debutante balls in 1960 and 1961 make it possible to imagine what a special evening this was for the young ladies who attended. One program has the imprint of the woman’s lipstick inside.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0194b5f13.

Scrap Book for the first year of
 the "Girls Mexico Bello Auxiliary Club"
 October 20, 1953 thru October 20, 1954



Anita Maria Garcia
 Presidenta



MARGARET GONZALES
 Secretary



ROSEYDA POIRIE
 Vice President



JO ANN OLIVARES
 Treasurer



FRANCES GONZALES
 Fin. Treasurer



MARGALITA MARTINEZ
 Reporter



VIRGINIA MARTINEZ
 Program Chairman



STELLA REYNA
 Editor



ANGELINA RAMOE
 Sgt. at Arms



Secretary,
 Margaret Gonzalez

The Houston Metropolitan Research Center's collection for Club México Bello contains many treasures, including a scrapbook prepared to commemorate the inaugural years of the Girls México Bello Auxiliary.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGE0024b5, Scrapbook.

the use of the Spanish language, and to bring a closer understanding between the peoples of Mexico and other Latin-American countries and the peoples of the United States.”⁹

Club México Bello participated in community events including Mexican holidays such as Cinco de Mayo, Día de la Independencia (Mexican Independence Day), and Día de la Raza (Day of the Race). Celebrating these holidays allowed the club members to stay in touch with their Mexican roots and to share part of their heritage with other Houstonians. By reaching out to people of all ages — such as sponsoring girls’ sports teams and a Boy Scout Troop with LULAC — the club “sought to furnish an outlet for the social, athletic, and cultural activities of the young.” During the Depression, the club suffered financially, yet, in the midst of it all, it continued working in a less visible manner. Club México Bello raised funds for the city’s poor Mexican community by organizing benefit dinners and dances at the Rusk Settlement

House. Club members also handed out clothing and other articles to the needy children at Rusk Settlement. Through many of its charitable efforts, Club México Bello “opened doors for the whole community to participate in any projects whether they were civic, political, or benevolent.”¹⁰

Even though Club México Bello’s membership was strictly limited to men, the members’ wives made major contributions to the club as well. The wives organized teas in each other’s homes and coordinated arrangements for the Debutantes dance. Dr. Dorothy Caram, wife of club member Dr. Pedro Caram, taught the debutantes to dance and hosted many teas for the members’ wives. In 1954, the ladies formed a women’s auxiliary, Club Femenino México Bello, with Virginia de la Isla as its first president.¹¹



Dr. Dorothy Caram speaks at a Black and White ball in the Shamrock Hilton Grand Ballroom in the 1980s. Working on the galas from 1960 to 2000, she recalls the affairs reached close to 1,000 guests. Her husband, Pedro C. Caram, M.D., served as president for many years and ensured people of all social strata were welcome at the balls and quinceañeras.

Photo courtesy of Dorothy Caram.

After the 1960s, the club limited its activities, primarily because other organizations filled the community’s needs. De León explains, “By the 1970s past its fiftieth year of existence, [Club México Bello] had decided to revise the club’s statutes as they seemed inapplicable to the changing times. Instead of trying to perpetuate ‘lo mejor del carácter mexicano’ as it had done previously, it now sought to instill young people with ethnic pride in their Mexican heritage.”¹² Initially Club México Bello had served as a vehicle for social change by altering public perceptions about Mexicans through its elegant balls and events. Within the Mexican American community, it helped to alleviate the nostalgia felt for the old country by recreating a piece of Mexico in Houston. Moving forward, however, Club México Bello shifted its focus to maintaining Mexican cultural traditions and pride in residents’ Mexican heritage. Today, the club still hosts its Black and White and Debutante balls. They remain as family traditions passed down from the first generation of club members and Mexican immigrants in 1924.

Club México Bello began with a mission to put forth a positive image of Mexican Americans and to maintain Mexican tradition by creating a little Mexico abroad, “*hacer un México chiquito en el extranjero*.”¹³ By hosting elegant dances, participating in community events, and providing an outlet for Latin American expression, the club fulfilled its mission of creating a “Beautiful Mexico” in our Houston community.

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The young women had basketball and volleyball teams, but this fundraiser for the México Bello Girls featured the boys basketball game as the star attraction at Rusk Settlement.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGE0024 Scrapbook.