



Children from the Santa Teresita catechetical center in the Heights, accompanied by catequistas from Our Lady of Guadalupe, Bernadina Gonzales, Porfiria Gonzales (sisters), and Petra Sanchez, circa 1935. Photo courtesy of Petra Guillen.

LA COLONIA MEXICANA: A HISTORY OF MEXICAN AMERICANS IN HOUSTON

By Jesus Jesse Esparza

In 1836, newcomers from the United States along with their Tejano (Texas Mexicans) allies, took up arms against the Mexican government and successfully seceded from that nation.¹ Following the Battle of San Jacinto, which ended the Texas Revolution, Texians (Anglo Texans) ordered Mexican prisoners to clean the swampland on which Houston would be built. Afterwards, most were sent home, but many stayed, creating the starting point of early Mexican settlement in the Houston region.²

COMMUNITY GROWTH & FORMATION, 1900-1930

Between 1836 and 1900, Mexicanos lived on the outskirts of Houston, coming into town mostly to find work. By 1900, they began to settle permanently within the city, occupying a region southeast of downtown called the Second Ward (Segundo Barrio), which quickly became the unofficial hub of their cultural and social life. After the turn of the twentieth century, approximately 1,000 Mexican Americans lived in Houston. Showing tenacity and creativity, they formed a viable community with networks of businesses, organizations, and religious and cultural institutions. By 1910, an estimated 2,000 people of Mexican extraction lived throughout the city.³

One of the earliest Mexican American neighborhoods to emerge in Second Ward was *El Alacrán* (the scorpion). Another was Magnolia Park, although it grew farther east along the Houston Ship Channel. North of downtown in the Fifth Ward, Mexican Americans established a residential zone, and about 100 Mexican American families settled in the Heights area. Most of the early Mexican American neighborhoods were poor areas without paved streets, running water, gas, or electric services. These amenities were gradually added after the areas experienced permanent settlement and growth.⁴

Mexican Americans worked in most industries and established a variety of businesses, laying the foundation for a bustling Mexican American economy. Traditionally, they worked as tailors, clerks, cooks, and boot makers, like Feliciano Medel, who helped make Houston a capital of western boot making. Many worked in the oil refineries, on railroad shipyards, or on crews building the Houston Ship Channel.⁵

Over time, a number of Mexican-American-owned businesses emerged throughout the city. Businessmen and businesses included Jose Gomez's sign painting company, Eciquia Castro's café, Francisco Hernandez of the Alamo



Residents of the El Alacrán barrio, known originally as Schrimpf's Field, dealt with dilapidated housing conditions following the departure of the area's early German residents.

Photo courtesy of Ripley House, Neighborhood Centers, Inc.

Furniture Company, Jose and Socorro Sarabia of Hispano Americana Book Store, Melesio Gomez of La Consentida café, and La Preferencia Barbershop of Magnolia Park. Mexican Americans also owned and operated various printing shops and produced some of the earliest Spanish language newspapers in town, including *El Anunciador*, *La Tribuna*, *El Tecolote*, and *La Gaceta Mexicana*. Mexican Americans also managed drugstores, restaurants, bakeries, schools, barbershops, ice cream parlors, dry good stores,

Rusk Settlement House and School provided educational opportunities for Mexican American children in the neighborhood.

Photo courtesy of Ripley House, Neighborhood Centers, Inc.

and gas stations. They worked in white-collar jobs as bankers, courthouse aids, postal men, lawyers, actors, singers, and as teachers like John Mercado, who taught Spanish at Houston High School.⁶

Mexican Americans established a variety of social, cultural, religious, and political organizations to provide support to the budding communities. El Campo Laurel, considered the first Mexican American organization in town, was established in 1908 and offered services ranging from recreation to insurance. Other self-help organizations included Mutualista Benito Juarez of Magnolia Park and Pasadena's Mutualista Miguel Hidalgo. One of the most influential and business savvy organizations to form during this period was Club Femenino Chapultepec, which was founded by women in 1931 to secure jobs for Mexican Americans in Houston's slowed but steady business sector.⁷ All of these early clubs played an important role, at times offering the only protection for a people with few public resources.

Constructed in 1911 in Second Ward, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church is considered the first Mexican American church in Houston and the first religious institution to offer services in Spanish. It provided food and shelter and ran one of the earliest schools for Mexican American children. In the 1920s, the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church opened and with this second church, Mexican Americans now had multiple institutions to serve their spiritual and personal needs. Established in 1907, the Rusk Settlement House provided food and shelter, helped people apply for residency or citizenship, and provided



kindergarten classes to Mexican American children.⁸ The Catholic churches along with the Rusk Settlement House became cornerstones of the Mexican American communities and served as their most identifiable landmarks.

A vibrant Mexican American culture thrived from Houston's earliest days. Mexicanos celebrated holidays (Mexican and American), birthdays, religious ceremonies, and music festivals. Lively musical groups, traveling shows, clubs, and theaters like El Teatro Azteca, one of the earliest Mexican American theaters and the first Spanish language theater in the city, sustained Mexican American culture. Adding to that were clubs and lounges like El Salon Juarez and Teatro, La Cruz Azul Mexicana Theater, and Spanish-speaking vaudeville groups like Los Hermanos Areu.⁹ Always a cause celeb and booming form of entertainment were *fiestas patrias* (cultural celebrations) like *diez y seis de septiembre* (the date of Mexico's independence from Spain) put on by cultural clubs such as La Asamblea Mexicana.

Mexican Americans also brought new musical traditions to Houston. Lydia Mendoza, a native Houstonian out of the Heights, gained national attention for her musical talents during the twenties and thirties. Big band orchestras were also popular, especially groups such as La Orquesta Tipica Torres, Los Rancheros Orchestra, and Alonzo y sus Rancheros.¹⁰

Ripe throughout the area were sports clubs and teams made up of Mexican Americans, including El Club Deportivo Azteca, the Houston Soccer Team, and the Mexican Inn Baseball Team. Sports teams like organizations and cultural clubs created solidarity, fostered pride, and helped the different Mexican American communities stabilize and grow.¹¹

THE DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II, 1930-1945

The 1930s greatly affected the lives of Houston's 14,500 Mexican Americans. Although the city escaped many of the problems experienced elsewhere, attitudes regarding a people believed to be at the root of the Depression ran strong throughout Houston. City officials accused Mexican Americans of draining the economy and began raiding their communities to deport them. Mexican Americans became victims of aggressive discriminatory policies, including segregation and disenfranchisement. Organizations, cultural centers, and entertainment locales either went out of business or were forced to close. Moreover, many federal programs designed to end the Depression were denied to Mexicanos—even those with evidence of citizenship. Those who stayed suffered from an entrenched poverty. So horrific was the economic status of these families that children often dropped out of school to find work, sometimes shining shoes or delivering newspapers to supplement their parents' income.¹²

To help the community cope with the Depression, individuals, groups, and institutions like Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and the Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana engaged in relief services. In 1932, Bartoleme Casa formed El Club Pro-Repatriacion to try to help his countrymen return to Mexico voluntarily and even purchased a truck to drive people there. Other organizations like the Latin American Club (LAC) tried to dispel anti-Mexican sentiment by convincing whites that Mexican



La Gaceta Mexicana was one of the earliest Mexican American newspapers in the city. Photo courtesy of Dr. Dorothy Caram.

Americans were interested in assimilating into their culture, in hopes that anti-Mexican feelings along with arrests, roundups, and deportations would cease. Also important in helping Mexican Americans cope were *salones* and dance halls which became spaces for people to escape life's harsh realities. Patrons packed establishments like El Salon Juarez, Bonita Gardens Dance Hall, Club Recreativo Tenochtitlan, and El Salon Hidalgo.¹³

Perhaps what protected Mexican Americans the most, though, was an intense socio-political maturation that had been developing since the early 1900s. During this time, Mexican Americans saw the development of a middle class, a shift in identity from temporary Mexican migrant to permanent American of Mexican descent, and a trend among organizations away from mutual aid societies toward civil rights activist groups. Considered a defining moment in the campaign for civil rights, in 1929 Mexican Americans formed the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), one of the earliest national organizations to challenge discrimination against them.¹⁴ LULAC, like other groups, assisted families during the Depression.

With the Depression slowing, families stabilized as forced deportations declined. Moreover, Mexican Americans began finding jobs again and opening businesses, like Melchor Cantu's Rio Rico Grocery and Market or Felix's Restaurant, named after founder Felix Tijerina. Responding to Houston officials' refusal to allow Mexicans

to be buried in cemeteries within the city limits, Felix H. Morales and his wife, Angelina, established the Morales Funeral Home to provide community members with this important service.¹⁵

What really improved conditions for Mexican Americans, however, was the outbreak of war in Europe. As the United States drew closer to joining the war, scapegoating of Mexican Americans became a non-issue as many of them served in all branches of the military. The city's first war casualty was a Mexican American, Joe Padilla, a Navy recruit killed in the South Pacific. Some 300,000 Mexican Americans enlisted. After the war, they won the most Medals of Honor of any ethno-racial group. For Mexican American Houstonians, no other World War II soldier generated more pride than Sergeant Macario Garcia, who received the Medal of Honor in 1945. Other Houston soldiers included Leon Eguia; the Zepeda brothers, Roberto, Daniel, Elias, and Isaac; Saragosa Garcia; Felicitas Cerda; Alfred Hernandez; Ernest Eguia; and Robert Ramon to name a few. Mexican American women played their part by forming groups like the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and worked in warehouses, factories, mills, canneries, and service industries to sustain the economy and contribute to the war effort.¹⁶

POST-WAR HOUSTON, 1945-1960

Following World War II, the city witnessed an economic boom. Technological advances and the need for petrochemicals during the war allowed Houston to become a global trader. This boom attracted more Mexican Americans and resulted in an explosion of new businesses like Felix Morales' KLVL, Houston's first Spanish language radio station. The Mexican American community also saw an expanding middle class and the ability to fight discrimination through new civil rights groups such as the LULAC Council #60, its women's auxiliary Ladies LULAC Council #22, and the American G.I. Forum, a group composed exclusively of Mexican American veterans.¹⁷

These organizations confronted inequity in different ways. LULAC, for example, launched the "Little Schools of the 400" program, which instructed children in 400 basic English words to prevent them from struggling in first or second grades. The G.I. Forum, on the other hand, promoted higher education through the G.I. Bill, which provided opportunities for returning servicemen and women. These and other organizations also attacked segregation and forced integration of Houston's schools, parks, public facilities, and city agencies like the Houston Police Department, which swore in Raul C. Martinez as its first Mexican American uniformed officer.¹⁸ Although far from being fully integrated into American society, Mexican Americans made significant inroads and fervently pushed the envelope during the post-war period—a precursor to the heightened activism the community would witness in the coming decades.

CIVIL RIGHTS HOUSTON, 1960-1980

By the 1960s, Mexican Americans were engaging in more forceful activism as they underwent a militant transformation that asked them to abandon self-identifying terms like Latin or Mexican American, and to adopt instead terms



John F. Kennedy at the Rice Hotel on November 21, 1963, the day before he died. He was invited by LULAC to meet with members of the Mexican American community, which had an active Viva Kennedy Club to re-elect the president. Lyndon B. Johnson is behind Kennedy, and to the right of Johnson is Raul Martinez, Houston's first Mexican American police officer.

Photo courtesy of Benny Martinez.

like Chicano. For them, Chicano was something new, bold, and more confrontational toward securing change. Although viewed as a young people's crusade, the Chicano Movement included anyone willing to effect positive change for Mexican Americans. Women also espoused emboldened attitudes. In 1971, they hosted *La Conferencia de Mujeres por la Raza*, the first conference of its kind where Chicanas called for their liberation and demanded equal treatment from both the larger society and Mexican American men.¹⁹

One of the city's most militant activist groups was the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), which spearheaded numerous boycotts using confrontational tactics against the school districts, police brutality, and



Businessman and community activist, Felix Tijerina, accepts a check for the School of 400 from an unknown benefactor.

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

the Vietnam War. Another militant organization was the Mexican American Education Council (MAEC), which took on HISD in 1971 and encouraged parents to strike in response to a proposed court-ordered plan that desegregated the district by merging only brown and black students, effectively exempting white schools. This particular boycott united numerous Mexican American organizations, including MAYO and LULAC with help from the Houston Catholic Church and a cadre of community activists unaffiliated with any group.²⁰

After the turn of the twentieth century, Mexican Americans fought for access to schools and admittance into institutions of higher learning. In the late 1920s, for example, they helped Estella Gomez enroll in the all-white Sam Houston High School. In 1929, she became the first Mexican American to graduate from Houston's public schools. Francisco Chairez was the first Houston Mexican American to graduate from college, attaining his degree from Rice Institute in 1928. By the seventies, Mexican Americans formed their own schools, like Hispanic International University founded in 1970. In 1979, they established the George I. Sanchez School, an alternative school dedicated to ensuring Mexican American youth excelled in school and graduated.²¹ Early on, Mexican Americans made education a top priority and effectively used a variety of methods to make it available to their children.

During this period, the Mexican American middle class expanded and became a serious economic and political force. Partly responsible for the growth was Operation SER/Jobs for Progress launched in 1965 to increase Mexican American employment. More than simply providing jobs, this program also increased the purchasing power of Mexican Americans and allowed them to become significant donors to political campaigns. They actively campaigned for Henry B. Gonzales and John F. Kennedy, among others. One of the most influential political groups in the city was the Houston Civic Action Committee (CAC), which organized the Viva Kennedy Clubs and came to play a major role in the election of JFK. Changing its name to

the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO), this group continued to politicize Mexican Americans. In 1968, PASO opened a voter registration headquarters in Houston and was so successful in registering Mexican Americans that they successfully elected Ben T. Reyes as a state representative, Leonel Castillo as city controller, and Armando Rodriguez as municipal judge. By 1974, Mexican Americans formed their own political party, La Raza Unida Party (LRUP). As the eighties approached, political activism continued steadily forward as evidenced by the creation of the Harris County Hispanic Caucus and the Mexican American Hispanic Advisory Council that sought to address the political problems faced by Houston's Mexican Americans.²²

A protest against the Houston Police Department for their wrongful beating and death of war veteran Joe Campos Torres in 1977 rallied local Chicanos like never before. From the trial that ensued, officers involved in the incident were sentenced to serve one year in prison for felony misdemeanor and ten years for violating Torres's constitutional rights; however, the judge suspended those sentences and gave the officers five years' probation. This angered Mexican Americans and set the stage for massive boycotts. Under the leadership of Houston's People United to Fight Police Brutality, people protested outside HPD headquarters. When their demands fell on deaf ears, they took to the streets. One year later the community, still angered by the lack of justice, partook in a community insurrection at Moody Park, where they overturned police vehicles, destroyed property, and shouted slogans like "Get the Pigs!" and "Justice for Joe Torres!"²³

Many of the organizations of earlier decades, however, still fought to secure Mexican American rights. LULAC and the American G.I. Forum along with new organizations like Ripley House, founded in 1970 by Felix Fraga, fought against discrimination, poverty, and injustice. To keep the community abreast of daily news and to help popularize Chicanismo (Mexican American nationalism), Chicanos used various newspapers like *Papel Chicano* founded in 1970

by Johnny Almdarez, Carlos Calbillo, and Leo Tanguma, to name a few. Headquartered in Magnolia Park, the paper took a militant stance reporting on grassroots activism, protests, and demonstrations, as well as criticizing politicians they felt failed to serve the people.²⁴ By the 1980s, Mexican Americans were becoming a part of the mainstream as many now lived outside the old Mexican American barrios and no longer used radical methods to bring about change.



Following the beating and death of war veteran Joe Campos Torres at the hands of police and the subsequent suspended sentence handed down, Mexican Americans took to the streets to demonstrate against police brutality.

Photo courtesy of Jesus Cantu Medel.



This is one segment of the Canal Street mural that was created by Leo Tanguma. Approximately 240 feet in length, the mural is Houston's best-known example of Chicano / Latino / Mexicano public art and an important statement about the struggles faced by Mexican Americans.

Photo by Natalie Garza.

A NEW CITY, 1980-2000

At the close of the twentieth century, Mexican American communities continued to flourish and impact the city in profound ways. Mexican Americans still engaged in political activism, ran businesses, and finally broke into Houston's news media scene with reporter Elma Barrera and anchor Sylvan Rodriguez. Houston also saw an influx in Latino newcomers who brought specialized skills to the city from various Spanish-speaking countries.²⁵

Political activism flourished as community members successfully campaigned and elected their own to important positions, like Judge Sylvia Garcia, head of Houston's municipal courts, and Augustina Reyes, a trustee for HISD. Unlike previous years, Mexican Americans during these decades had more candidates from which to choose. In 1988, for example, Al Luna ran against Raul Martinez for state representative, and John Castillo opposed Victor Treviño for constable of Precinct 6.²⁶

Houston saw an explosion of Mexican American art. The mural on Canal Street in Second Ward, although an extension of the artistic expressions of the seventies, is perhaps the best-known example of public art. Approximately 240 feet long, this mural serves as a source of pride and is considered an important artistic statement of Mexican American struggles. Another popular example of Mexican American public art is the sculpture *Vaquero* by Luis Jimenez, located in Moody Park.²⁷

Theatrical companies like Teatro Con Ganas and organizations like Talento Bilingüe de Houston kept cultural expressions thriving as did music festivals; folkloric associations like the Guatemalan Folkloric Association or the Ballet Folklorico Bellas Artes de Houston, and contemporary musical groups like Grupo Valentino. Other things

that kept cultural expressions alive were clubs such as Latin Attractions, a Northside low riding organization, and trail riders groups like Los Vaqueros, which participated in the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.²⁸ These kinds of cultural groups have maintained a presence in Houston since Mexican Americans first established them here and show no signs of slowing down.

The natural birth rates of Mexican Americans and the influx of Spanish-speaking newcomers from Latin American countries contributed to Houston's ranking second among U.S. cities in the number of Latino residents. By the mid-1980s, 500,000 Latinos called the metropolitan area home. Countless arrivals from Latin America are undocumented, and as a result many live in Houston's poorest sections where they endure a lack of running water, scarce food, exhausting work hours, and zero health benefits. Service organizations dedicated to improving their way of life have since emerged throughout the city, such as Casa Juan Diego, a grassroots social service agency for Central American refugees; the Chicano Family of Magnolia Park, which provides services for undocumented workers; and health facilities like Clinica Azteca and Casa de Amigos Health Clinic. In the mid-1980s, things improved slightly because many of the undocumented qualified for protection under an amnesty bill, but for most, extreme poverty remained the norm.²⁹

HOUSTON IN THE 21ST CENTURY, 2000-2011


At present, Houston is the fourth largest city in the country and is home to approximately one million Latinos. Since 2000, it has become the most popular destination for Latino immigration in Texas. Although most newcomers still arrive from Mexico, many also now come from other Latin American countries. With this increase in population, the

recent battle over redistricting the city is the most pressing political issue for Mexican Americans and Latinos. They have challenged the plan proposed by Republican legislators, arguing that it dilutes the Latino vote and violates the federal Voting Rights Act.³⁰ Latino immigrants have transformed the social geography of Houston, as many have not followed the residential patterns of Mexican Americans but have settled in areas along Loop 610, near Bellaire and Chimney Rock, as well as in Spring Branch, Alief, and Aldine.

Perhaps the greatest contribution these new Americans have made to Houston is to establish and maintain a robust Latin American business sector. Throughout the city, large numbers of Latino-owned businesses can be found—from banks like *Banco Popular*, to *carnicerias* and *taquerias*, like *Mondongos*, to multi-million dollar businesses such as *La Espiga De Oro Tortilla Factory*.³¹

Moreover, other business leaders, seeing the potentially lucrative Latino market, launched enterprises to cater to its needs, including *Fiesta Mart*, *El Mercado*, and *Plaza of the Americas*. They have partnered with Latinos to introduce a professional futbol (soccer) team, the *Houston Dynamo*. The *Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce* recently emerged as a major powerhouse with more than 4,000 member businesses.³² From small mom-and-pop businesses like *Taqueria El Jalisco* to major global corporations such as *Goya*, these businesses keep Houston's economy thriving.

The debate over immigration has always been controversial, but following September 11, 2001, securing the borders took on a different meaning as xenophobia, nativism, and fear coupled with national security dictated the conversation. A strong anti-immigrant sentiment has gained momentum since that time.

Many Americans have come to support punitive laws like SB 1070 to reduce the number of Latino immigrants who they believe drain the economy. But immigrants generate millions for the U.S. economy and contribute millions more to their homelands by way of remittances. They work hard, sometimes multiple jobs. Daniel Galvan, for example, has gone back and forth between Mexico and the U.S. since 1952 working as a field laborer, baker, custodian, and kitchen helper.³³ Immigrants love their families, respect the law (at least the fair ones), have a sense of community, and sacrifice everything so their kids and grandkids can live a better life. They go to church, pay their taxes, donate to the needy, and apply for legal residency and/or citizenship. They are politically conscious, socially moral, business savvy, and patriotic to the United States. In spite of the controversy that surrounds them, Latino immigrants, like Mexican Americans, move forward, positively impacting the city in profound ways. 

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Guadalupana dancers perform in the Fiestas Patrias parade, 2011.

Photo by Natalie Garza.

