

A History of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Austin

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The history of Mexican Americans in Austin is largely an unexplored and unwritten history. No book or scholarly article about the topic has been written and if a computer search is conducted using the keywords “Mexican American”, “history”, and “Austin”, not one book can be located. This is not to say that no one has written on Mexican Americans in Austin because several dissertations, theses, student papers, essays, and newspaper articles have been written. However, without a book or a journal article, access is difficult. This situation parallels the history of Tejanos and Tejanas in general—more is needed. This brief history outlines some patterns of Mexican life in Austin based on a quick survey of archival materials at the Austin History Center and use of the *Handbook of Texas*.

The history of Mexican Americans in Austin does not begin with the arrival of Stephen F. Austin to Texas in 1823. Native Americans lived and settled in the area, the most significant group being the Tonkawas. This area was largely their domain though Apaches and Comanches could also be found here. Spanish explorers were the second group in the area although no permanent settlement by way of a mission, presidio, or pueblo was built here. As early as 1691 on his way to East Texas, Domingo Teran de los Ríos passed through the southeast corner of present-day Travis County. In 1716 Domingo Ramón also bound to East Texas passed through the area and in 1720 the Marqués de Aguayo cut across the northern part of the county on his way to the missions. Around 1730 the missions San Francisco de los Neches, Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de los Hasinai, and San José de los Nazonis were temporarily located

near the Colorado near the site presently known as Barton Springs. The Spanish initially intended to missionize and Christianize the Tonkawa but finally abandoned these efforts in 1752. Spanish explorers made their ways through again in 1732, 1754-1755, and 1766. In 1766 the Marqués de Rubí and cartographer Nicolás de Lafora recorded the existence of three “rancherías de gentiles” on the Colorado River near present-day Austin. In summary, during the Spanish colonial era up to 1821, there was no permanent settlement to provide a basis for a town.

With the creation of the republic of Mexico in 1821, the Mexican government sought to establish a more permanent foothold in its northern frontier and allowed white settlers empresario grants to settle colonies and families. Stephen F. Austin received such a grant. Some Mexicans were granted land titles in this area of Coahuila y Tejas. In 1828 Santiago del Valle received a land grant where the Montopolis Recreation Center is now located. Mexicans, then, were present in what became the town of Austin in 1839 after the republic of Texas was created in 1836.

The new Texas republic was intimately linked to the South and the United States. Slavery as an institution, economy, and culture was established in Texas and accordingly in 1840 the city fathers wrote Austin’s first ordinance on slavery. It forbade “any white man or Mexican” from “making associates of slaves.” Such an ordinance tells us that Mexicans were present in Austin and it also reminds us of Mexico’s official anti-slavery policy since 1829. In 1854 the city again prohibited such close association with slaves and an Anglo vigilante committee was formed to keep Mexicans out of Austin to prevent such. The Tejano community found itself on both sides of the slavery question and in the Civil War from 1861 to 1865. Indeed, just as some Austin

Tejanos helped slaves, others like Antonio Priba served as a private in Company G in the Flournoy Regime of Texas Volunteers for the Confederacy.

The post-Civil War era saw the breakup of the slave economy and the rise of livestock raising, small tenant farming, and sharecropping in Travis County while this period also witnessed the beginnings of industrialization of Austin in general, particularly in the 1880s. In the 1870s two railroads made their way through Austin which helped to give rise to food processing and building store plants, furniture and pottery factories, and machine shops. An 1872 newspaper article reported that Mexican men in Travis County were “mostly teamsters and farm laborers.” Mexicans in the county were still largely a rural population but the 1870s also marked the early formation of an urban community. In 1875 census taker Joe Costa reported 297 Mexicans within Austin’s city limits. A barrio and an urban economy was evident. The permanent nature of this new Tejano community was evident with the establishment of Mexican churches. In 1890 and 1899 La Iglesia Methodista Unida Emmanuel and La Primer Iglesia Bautista Mexicana were founded respectively. Mexican Catholics continued to attend St. Patrick’s Catholic church founded in 1852 which reportedly maintained segregated pews for some time. The founding of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in 1907 and El Buen Pastor, a Presbyterian church, in 1913 added a stronger foundation for the community.

Nevertheless, Mexicans in Travis County continued to be primarily rural throughout the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s. In 1910, most Mexican families worked as sharecroppers in the county. In an oral history, Earl Herrera noted, “In those times almost all the Mexican Americans lived in rural areas. The economic life was limited. For example, the Mexican usually worked as a sharecropper. And he had to go to the American to look for the crops ripened. The American

would give to the Mexican so much provision and after the crops came in the Mexican would go to the store and pay.”

In town, Mexicans worked in various occupations. In the 1870s Mexican women owned and worked in candy-making and tamale-making businesses. In the 1890s John M. Valdez worked as a blacksmith repairing horseshoes. By 1900 many worked in chili factories. The 1905 Austin city directory listed Endoxio Chapa as its first Mexican druggist in 1905. In 1908 Ben Garza and his wife established a meat market and opened four more later. In 1919 Miguel Oyervide worked as the first Mexican policeman and in 1916 the couple Dr. Alberto García, a physician, and Eva Carrillo moved to Austin. These examples suggest that the businesses of Mexican descent persons were primarily in the service sector and gave rise to a tiny middle class.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 stimulated immigration to the north so Austin like San Antonio and Houston was reshaped. Likewise, the United States witnessed the decline of family farming, more sharecropping as well as the rise of an urban populace. In 1883 Menchaca Elementary School was built to serve residents. Likewise, Mexicans formed their own schools to further their education. Between 1913 and 1920 Valentín Arcala Herrera, a teacher in Mexico, opened schools in his home for children of El Buen Pastor teaching fifteen to twenty children. After the 1916 Austin school board decided to send non-English-speaking children to separate schools for “Mexicans”. In the 1920s Mexican students attended Comal School, a separate four-room house school for first and second grade. In 1919, about 150 Mexican children attended the new Our Lady of Guadalupe church school. In 1927 Austin permitted its first Mexican descent person, Consuelo Méndez, to teach in the Austin Independent School District.

The Mexican community of Austin reached its maturation in the 1920s. Two events marked this maturation. First, the first Spanish language newspaper *El Vanguardia* edited and published by Dr. Alberto García and Eva Carrillo appeared. And in 1921 a Diez y Seis celebration on East Avenue drew 6,000 participants. The 1920s also saw the birth or rise of numerous Mexican organizations. By 1921 Camp Cerezo No. 252, Woodmen of the World, a mutual aid society existed. In 1927 Tomás Galindo and Eustacio Cepeda founded the Sociedad Funeraria de Agricultores “Mariano Escobar” de Creedmoor y Austin. Club Anahuac was another voluntary society by 1929. Mexican women participated in Cruz Azul, a group similar to the American Red Cross but which worked closely with the Mexican Consulate. These organizations were important to a largely working-class community. Mexicans worked as seasonal farmworkers in the surrounding agricultural communities. In this decade, Mexican women worked as laundresses, domestics, candy-makers, and tamale-makers. Because of racially-defined work and gender-defined work and thus low wages, Mexicans were forced to supplement earnings. In 1927 researcher Earl Connell reported that “Mexican men, women, and children follow the city wagons to the dump to pick out the old rags, cans of spoiled food, partly rotten apples and other fruits, old boxes, and old cakes. That which is not eaten on the spot is carried to their houses, along with the worst kind of filth.” His report expressed racism typical of what whites considered “the Mexican problem”.

The 1920s and 30s saw the rise of more formalized and institutionalized patterns of racial discrimination. Racial discrimination intensified after the Texas revolt in 1836 and especially after the US/Mexico war ended in 1848. Persons of Mexican descent were largely considered “greasers”. In 1892 the *Austin American Statesman* headlines read “One Greaser Less.” But with

the 1920s the term “Mexican” became the typical designation despite the U.S. citizenship of a sector of the population. Thus, in the 1920s there were separate Mexican-descent cemeteries like San José Cemetery I and II in Montopolis which opened in 1919 by La Union Fraternal Mexicana and reflected segregationist patterns. Housing and real estate development also reflected racial segregation. A 1928 city plan sought to remove Mexicans from the downtown district and West Austin to the east side.

The 1930s witnessed a significant event in the history of the education of the Mexican community. In 1936 the Lorenzo de Zavala school, the first school specifically for the Mexican community was constructed. Though a segregated school, it offered a few children of Mexican descent a formal education. A few were able to obtain adequate education and in 1937 Seton Nursing School graduated its first Mexican American nurse.

The 1930s also marked the shift of the Mexican community from the west side of town to East Austin. By 1930 Mexicans constituted 10% of the Austin population. As early as 1925 Earl Connell found seventy Mexican families in houses and eight families living in converted railroad cars. In 1926 Nuestra Señora was moved to 9th Street and in 1928 the white-dominated city council devised a master plan marginalizing the Mexican community to East Austin. The Zavala School added permanency as did the Santa Rita Courts, public housing established in 1939. Expensive housing and racial covenants in housing also ensured that Mexicans would stay on their side of town.

The 1940s saw the growth of a Mexican American community in South Austin. By then Austin’s population was 87,930. In 1939 San José church was organized to serve 126 families in that area. Some South Austin whites did not welcome Mexican American neighbors. Signs

were posted in yards: "Go home, Mexicans." This occurred while Henry S. Terrazas fought for his country in World War II and with Daniel Ortega killed in action in France while carrying a wounded soldier to safety.

The late 40s and 1950s saw increased political activity by the Mexican community. Mexican Americans had historically voted. An 1872 newspaper noted voting by Mexicans. In 1902 Texas created a poll tax for voting which prevented many Mexican Americans from voting but which ended in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act. LULAC council #85 founded in 1938 sought to register voters and drew up a civil rights bill. The American G.I. Forum also organized a chapter here. Raymond Donley ran for state representative around 1949 and in 1951 attorney, Patricio Mendez ran for city council. And in the early 60s LULAC and PASSO (Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organization) waged a mass poll drive in East Austin to register voters.

Desegregation efforts were of major concern in the 1950s. By then Austin's population was 131,964. Throughout the 50s, the newspaper *El Demócrata* founded in 1943 and which existed to 1966 served the Mexican descent community. The bands of El Conjunto Cielito, the Mat Velásquez Orchestra, the Nash Hernández Orchestra, and the Manuel "Cowboy" Donley Orchestra were in full swing.

By the 1960s, Mexican Americans numbered between 15,000 and 20,000 in Austin or about 20%. Mexicans represented 20% of the workforce around 1960 mostly in unskilled or semiskilled occupations in small employer units in non-manufacturing activity. At the time, Austin was a non-industrial city dominated by institutional and white-collar employment. The development of Interstate 35 further solidified what is known as "East Austin." Researcher Sam Parigi noted, "To the casual visitor, Austin appears to be a prosperous town, but an

examination of the income of Latinos in Austin (and the rest of Texas) discloses “poverty in the midst of plenty.” The 1960 median income for Austin families was \$5,058 but for Austin Mexican Americans it was under \$3,000.

The 1960s witnessed at least three successful unionization efforts. In one of these firms, Mexicans earned \$1.00 an hour while Anglos received \$1.25. José García, Benny Martínez, and Reverend Frank Briganti of Cristo Rey Roman Catholic church proved key in unionization efforts at a concrete products firm and at a plastic pleasure boats firm. Perhaps even more important was the Economy Furniture strike, which began in 1967 when 252 workers went on strike, 40% of whom were women.

The Chicano movement also arose in the late 60s giving saliency to more activism and cultural florescence. The Brown Berets were active as was the Raza Unida Party, a third political party and a challenge to Democrats and Republicans. The 1970s saw the rise of political representation. In 1970 Richard Moya was elected the first Mexican American to a county-wide office, the Travis County Commissioner’s Court. Gus García was elected in 1972 as the first Mexican American to the school board while Gonzalo Barrientos became the first state representative, winning only by 84 votes in 1974. John Treviño Jr. was the first Mexican American to be elected to the Austin city council in 1975. Also, in 1974 the East Town Lake Citizens Association organized after families were displaced by the expansion of Fiesta Gardens and in 1978 confrontations with the police occurred over boat races.

Mexican American women organized politically in conjunction and independently from men. Mexican American women participated in the Cruz Azul in the 1920s, and in Ladies LULAC and the American G.I. Forum in the 40s and 50s. They were active in the Zavala School PTA in

the 1950s, and in the 60s in Raza Unida Party, and Brown Berets. Throughout the 70s, Martha P. Cotera represented the feminist inclinations of a sector of Austin women. In 1974 women formed the Mexican American Business and Professional Women's Association reflecting the development of a female middle class as well as the development of Chicana feminists. In 1980 Margaret Gómez became the first elected Mexican American woman in Travis County as a county commissioner and Lena Guerrero was elected as state representative. In 1983 and 1986 new schools were named after Emma H. Galindo and Consuelo Méndez. In 1987 the local chapter of the Hispanic Women's Network was formed. Austin gays and lesbians founded ALLGO, the Austin Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Organization in 1985.

Newspapers have served the community since the 1920s. *El Vanguardia* appeared in the 1920s; *El Universitario* (UT, 1929); *El Demócrata* in the 1940s (by Margarita Muñoz Simon); *La Fuerza* (1961); *Música* (1970); *Para La Gente* (UT, 1977); the bilingual *The Austin Light* (1980) and *La Prensa* (1981) and *Arriba* in the 1980s. Culture and art institutions include League of United Chicano Artists (LUCHA) (1977), La Peña (1982) and Mexic-Arte Museum (1984).

Academics in Austin have also made a mark in the city. The first Mexican American to attend the University of Texas at Austin was Marius García in 1894 while the first woman attended years later. A more sizeable number of Latinos joined in the 1930s and 40s. Dr. Carlos E. Castañeda became a professor of history in the 1930s and Dr. George I. Sánchez of New Mexico joined him in the 1940s. Jovita González of Rio Grande City obtained her master's degree in history in the 1930s. The Alba Club, a Latino club, existed in the 1950s. Dr. Américo Paredes joined the faculty in 1958 while the first Mexican American woman to join was Eva Curry in the

1970s. The Mexican American Studies Center was founded in 1970 and the Mexican American Library Project followed shortly after.

The history of Mexican Americans in Austin is a rich history. The history of people, organizations, institutions, churches, businesses, workers, musicians, artists, and writers, it is a history waiting to be collected, written, seen, and heard. We invite your participation.