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TEXAS INDEPENDENCE DAY

1836: The battle then and now

Date in history is more memorable after uproar about MLS club's name

By **LORI RODRIGUEZ**
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The number 1836 is key in Texas history.

It's the year Texas gained its independence, the year that Houston was founded and the year a Mexican army suffered bitter defeat at the battle of San Jacinto.

Today, 170 years after the signing of Texas' declaration of independence up the road at Washington-on-the-Brazos, most Texans are going through the routines of a normal workday. Schools, businesses and government offices are open and running. Most Houstonians would hardly notice the March 2 holiday except for a recent controversy that put 1836 back in the spotlight.

It's a controversy that shows just how much the city and sensibilities have changed, and just how much they haven't.

Civic leaders were caught off-guard by the reaction to the new Major League Soccer team's name, Houston 1836, which commemorates the date the city was founded. The name is being dropped after descendants of the people who lost Texas in 1836 asserted their growing political and economic clout, insisting the name be changed because of its negative connotation for them.

Hispanics, most of them of Mexican descent, surpassed Anglos as the largest ethnic group in the city in the 2000 census and are about 42 percent of the population. One of every three Texans is Hispanic, and they want a review of the Anglo-centric history the state has long celebrated.

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Simmering resentments also surfaced as local Hispanics recalled a once deeply segregated state where Mexican-Americans were routinely rejected at restaurants, rebuked for speaking Spanish in classrooms and denied such basic civil rights as serving on juries.

"As the commissioner whose precinct includes the sacred battleground of San Jacinto, and a native Texan, I am proud of our history. We can celebrate our independence on Thursday, recognizing that we went to war for freedom, not against a people. After all, many Mexicans fought alongside Sam Houston," says Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia.

"However, I can understand that this was also a sad time for the people of Mexico and their descendants ... in a conflict which sometimes pitted families against their own people."

Lobbying for change

Garcia, who three years ago became Harris County's first Hispanic commissioner in more than a century, took the point after concerned constituents called, e-mailed and approached her at several different appearances. More than half of the estimated 1 million people in her precinct are Hispanic. She, in turn, approached team owner Philip F. Anschutz.

"He's a businessman, straight to the point, and very pragmatic. He recognized that there was no need to start off on the wrong foot with a significant part of his fan base," says Garcia. "It's really not about whether one thinks the concerns about the name are legitimate or not. The fact is concerns do exist."

The team's new name is expected to be announced within days, but the controversy lingers.

Has the pendulum of political correctness swung so far that Houstonians can't even celebrate the founding of their city, as the team name intended?

"I don't think it's swung too far. But I think that what we need to do is be educated about our rich heritage," says Jan Devault, a Daughter of the Republic of Texas and president of the Friends of the San Jacinto Battleground.

"You can't think of Texas versus Mexico. That's too narrow. If this controversy helps us look at history with wider eyes and a bigger focus, then hooray.

"History is never simple."

What is certain

Historians seem to agree on some basic facts:

The conflict began as a civil war. Mexican president Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was a dictator. Many Tejanos wanted freedom from his harsh rule.

The war was not an absolute war between Mexicans and Anglos. Eight Tejanos died alongside Anglos inside the Alamo.

Juan Seguín led the revolutionaries' charge at the Battle of San Jacinto.

The first vice president of the Republic of Texas was Lorenzo de Zavala.

But Mexican prisoners from the final battle were forced to dredge the swamp that would become Houston and help build the city. After the victory, Seguin became mayor of an unruly San Antonio, got caught in escalating hostilities between Anglos and Tejanos and, ultimately, was forced to resign and flee to Mexico.

It goes on, a multilayered history that is far from the simplified version drummed into Texans via Hollywood and decades of one-sided textbooks.

"Maybe Anglos find a lot of bravado in 1836. To us, it conjures all this bad history. Why should we put up with this?" says Tatcho Mindiola, director of the University of Houston Center for Mexican-American Studies.

"This community has to change," Mindiola said. "They could have pulled off the 1836 name years ago, but they sure can't now. We now have a very significant Mexican-American intellectual class that does its own research and isn't going to put up with this."

Mindiola points out that even Seguin's battlefield exploits have another side, noting that he led the charge in part to show that Gen. Sam Houston and other Anglos had no reason to question the Tejano unit's loyalty.

Patriotic 'litmus test'?

Historian C. David Pomeroy Jr. says he wasn't offended when the name was dropped. But he was perturbed.

"It disappointed me because obviously some Hispanics don't understand their Texas history and heritage. I celebrate July 4 and Sept. 16 (Mexico's independence day) as part of our state history," says Pomeroy. "It saddens me more that the education system hasn't gotten that story over. We haven't gotten past those old prejudices."

Apparently not. After UH history professor Raul A. Ramos wrote a Jan. 29 editorial in the Chronicle criticizing the team name, other Houstonians criticized him in letters to the editor.

The e-mail he received was even sharper, several suggesting that he "go back to Mexico."

"I never thought that writing about something that happened 170 years ago was evidence that you're advocating for Mexico," Ramos said.

One letter writer from Humble lamented that "apparently, objectivity in history loses ground to perceived racism in anything we do today."

The wife of a Brit living in Houston noted that, after moving to the U.S., "I haven't found him curled up on the floor every year complaining about the abusive nature of the Fourth of July."

Another letter writer felt more offended that Ramos was paid with state money.

"The response showed me how much people still make this a litmus test for patriotism. If you say anything other than the war was good and just, then somehow your allegiance is to Mexico and not to the United States," Ramos said.

"That the concerns caught people by surprise shows our culture still has long way to go."

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