

Stories from the Barrio

by Carlos E. Cuéllar

Introduction

The history of Mexican Fort Worth does not begin at a specific point, say 1883, the year the first Mexicanos are mentioned in the Fort Worth City Directory, but rather takes into account the sum total of their collective past. This complex history must include the story of their original circumstances in Mexico; their sources of livelihood; the social, economic, and political conditions with which they had to cope; the reasons for leaving their country; the exodus to the United States; the choices they made as to where to go and what to do; and the obstacles they faced.

Since the time of the conquista, when Cortez and his men subdued the mighty Aztec empire, Spaniards and native Indians intermarried to create mestisaje — a new mixed-blood nation with unique characteristics, institutions, and culture. The conquest of the New World, with its annihilation and subjugation of native peoples and culture, together with the terrors associated with the Inquisition, engendered a stereotypical view of Spaniards as a brutal and flawed race. The Alamo, Goliad, the Mexican War, sporadic border banditry, and Pancho Villa's exploits all reinforced negative Texan attitudes regarding their neighbors to the south. This mentality affected Anglo-Mexicano relations for generations.

Mexicanos in Exile

From 1876 to 1880 and then again from 1884 to 1911, under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915), Mexico enjoyed political peace and prosperity unknown since colonial times.¹ But the peace came at a price—generating prosperity that was enjoyed by only a few. During this time, called the Porfiriato, Díaz

ruled with an iron hand, and the living standards of the very poorest of Mexico's population fell to unthinkable levels. Simmering resentments of the obdurate policies of Díaz, which alienated his former supporters, coupled with the disparity in wealth, came to a head in 1910 and sparked the Mexican Revolution.² The decade from 1910-1920 is characterized as one of the most turbulent periods in Mexican history. An outgrowth of the Porfiriato and its repressive policies, the revolution united Mexicans of all classes to overthrow the despised dictator. While upper class Mexicanos fought to regain political power and protect their wealth, the peasants of the lower classes were caught in a war they didn't really understand and were unable to protect themselves from. If they chose to bear arms, they were invariably the population most likely to be killed. Their only other alternatives were to hide or to flee to America.³

The construction of railroads in Mexico, together with the dislocations associated with the Porfiriato and the Mexican Revolution, contributed to a mass exodus of Mexicanos from their beloved patria into the United States. Many sought refuge in Texas, finding employment as agricultural and livestock workers, coal miners, railroad crewmen, construction workers, packinghouse workers, steelworkers, cooks, dishwashers, and domestics. Fort Worth and surrounding areas, experiencing a steadily expanding population and burgeoning economy, provided many opportunities for immigrants.

Before 1910, Mexican migration north had been light, and most of those who came intended to return once they had earned enough money to satisfy their needs. It was the instability and violence of the Mexican Revolution that caused hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee north to the safety of the United States. By the end of the 1920s, a number of barrios had developed around the major industries in different areas of Fort Worth. And the barrios soon expanded with

immigrant Mexicanos, eager to begin a new life in a new world.

Many worked as migrant agricultural laborers—cotton pickers who followed the annual “Big Swing” harvest cycle that began in south and central Texas and ended in the northern and western parts of the state.⁴ Fort Worth’s railroads, stockyards, packing houses, steel plants, hotels, restaurants, and coffee shops offered the migrants and refugees opportunities for steady employment in one locale.

Thrust into an alien world, Mexicanos did their best to adjust and adapt to a new environment and culture. Some came with the intention of returning as soon as Mexico’s crisis abated, but in spite of initial obstacles, most Mexicanos stayed, made “Fore Wes” their home, and demonstrated a resiliency that helped them overcome the social, economic, and political challenges of subsequent decades. For most Mexicanos it was a positive change; some even succeeded in a big way. The “American Dream” became not only their dream but also their reality.

Their children’s identity underwent a significant transformation. They attended American schools, spoke mostly English, and embraced many aspects of the new culture. This was the Mexican-American generation—children born in America who were bilingual, bicultural, and, for the most part, unfamiliar with their parents’ homeland. To avoid pronunciation difficulty teachers gave many school children Anglo names, while others readily adopted them for assimilation purposes. With few exceptions, the tendency to assimilate increased with each succeeding generation; conversely, Spanish literacy gradually decreased.

The Second World War brought additional challenges and unprecedented opportunities. Fort Worth’s Mexican-Americans enlisted, trained, and fought on many fronts. While some paid the ultimate price, many veterans returned determined to forge changes. The ensuing civil rights movement focused attention on

opening up greater opportunities in jobs, housing, and education. Barrios exploded beyond their previously fixed boundaries, greater numbers of Mexican-Americans went on to college, and career opportunities broadened dramatically.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Chicano Movement called attention to the social, political, economic, and cultural realities of a growing ethnic population. As a result, Mexicanos and Mexican-Americans were no longer viewed as a passive, invisible, or ahistorical people. Chicano historians such as Ricardo Romo, Albert Camarillo, Richard Griswold del Castillo, Mario T. García, Arnoldo De León, George J. Sánchez, and F. Arturo Rosales depicted their subjects as people who adapted to changing realities and who created a world and culture all their own.

The stories from the barrios are fascinating and reveal much about the social and cultural nature of the people. Various residents from the South Side, Rock Island, la corte, and el TP share aspects of where they came from, how they came to arrive in Fort Worth, and what life was like in their barrios. A housewife, a mailman, a Hollywood actor, a street urchin, a railroad worker, a restaurateur, and a mystic engage in discussions on home remedies, natural medicines, border and Mexican cuisine, success in business, wakes and funerals, racism, pilgrimages, and mysticism. Each has added immeasurably to the character of Fort Worth and without them and their stories, our city would be a poorer place to live.

Fort Worth has indeed never been the same. The contributions by Mexicanos have been incalculable: Their labor transformed the skyline and allowed the economy to grow and prosper. Their cuisine forever changed the city's eating habits, and their music, dances, and customs added diversity to Cowtown's already rich cultural legacy. They are an integral part of Fort Worth's history.

