

**Amid the Shadows of Progress:  
Race and the Struggle for Metropolitan Democracy in Twentieth Century San Antonio**

by

Stephen Arionus

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Matthew Lassiter, Chair  
Associate Professor Maria Cotera  
Associate Professor Matthew Countryman  
Associate Professor Anthony Mora

Stephen Arionus

sarionus@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-6634-7208

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures.....	ix
List of Tables .....	xi
Abstract.....	xii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 Mapping the Discursive <i>Barrio</i> : Space, Disease, Identity, and Policing .....	23
1.1 Population Growth and the Immigrant Experience .....	25
1.2 The Construction of the <i>Barrio</i> and the Vice District.....	30
1.3 The Criminalization of Vice on the West Side .....	41
1.4 Soldiers and Vice .....	52
1.5 Tuberculosis and the <i>Barrio</i> .....	57
Chapter 2 “People are Power”: Creating Community on the West Side .....	67
2.1 The State and the “Mexican Problem”.....	70
2.2 The Local Consequences of the “Mexican Problem” .....	76
2.3 Eleuterio Escobar, LULAC, and The School Improvement League: Creating Community from the Ground Up.....	81
2.4 Emma Tenayuca: Creating Community through Labor Organizing and Protest.....	108
Chapter 3 “The Rumpled Angel of the Slums”: The Promises and Perils of Public Housing in San Antonio .....	139
3.1 Catherine Bauer’s Radical Public Housing Policy .....	141
3.2 The Federal Government’s Role in Maintaining the Housing Color Line .....	149
3.3 The “Rumpled Angel of the Slums”: Father Carmelo Tranchese and Public Housing in San Antonio. ....	157
3.4 The Pitfalls of Public Housing.....	174
Chapter 4 The Politics of Urban Renewal in San Antonio .....	184
4.1 Forcing the Old Machine Out .....	186
4.2 The Push for Council-Manager Form of City Government.....	191
4.3 The Creation of the Good Government League.....	193
4.4 The West Side GGL.....	197
4.5 Urban Renewal and The Campaign for HemisFair ‘68 .....	201
4.6 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and <i>Hunger in America</i> .....	223

Chapter 5 “The Little Man Has Lost Again”: <i>San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez</i> and the Quest for Equal Education” .....	233
5.1 The 1968 Edgewood High School Walkouts .....	237
5.2 Inequality from the State: the Texas Minimum Foundation Program .....	246
5.3 Spatial Segregation and Annexation Policy Creating Unequal School Boundaries ...	252
5.4 “It’s not the \$20,000 House I Object to—It’s the \$3,000 Family”: The Downfall of Turnkey III Housing .....	264
5.5 <i>Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District</i> .....	273
Epilogue .....	290
Bibliography .....	298

## List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, San Antonio, Texas, 1904.....	33
Figure 1.2 Enlarged Image of Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 32, San Antonio, Texas, 1904. ....	34
Figure 1.3: Enlarged Section of Sheet 32, Northwest Quadrant, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, San Antonio, Texas, 1904. ....	35
Figure 2.1:Motto of the Order Knights of America: Knowledge is Power. ....	83
Figure 2.2: Picture of Crowd Gathered at August Meeting of Student Improvement League, August 1948.....	103
Figure 2.3: Eleuterio Escobar Speaking to West Side Residents at a Rally in August 1948.....	104
Figure 2.4: Pro Schools Defense League’s Motto: To Balance the Scale is Our Aim. ....	107
Figure 2.5: Workers Separating Pecan Meat from Shell. ....	119
Figure 2.6: Pecan Shelling Shack with Pecan Meat Drying in the Yard. ....	120
Figure 3.1: HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report: Racial Concentrations. ....	151
Figure 3.2: HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report: Grades of Security.....	152
Figure 3.3: Mexican Corral, 1939.....	159
Figure 3.4: Detail of Mexican Corral, San Antonio, Texas, 1939. ....	160
Figure 3.5: Back of Negro Dwelling, San Antonio, 1939. ....	161
Figure 4.1: Architectural Rendering of the HemisFair ’68 Site.....	204
Figure 4.2: San Antonio’s Urban Renewal Project, 1950s-1960s. ....	206

Figure 4.3: Photo of mexicana Girl Sitting on Boardwalk. ....	208
Figure 4.4: Mexicana Walking on Makeshift Boardwalk.....	208
Figure 4.5: Urban Renewal and Play. ....	210
Figure 4.6: Urban Renewal and the View from Above. ....	211
Figure 4.7: Congested San Antonio Street.....	212
Figure 4.8: Tree-lined Streets. ....	213
Figure 5.1 Total Population: Spanish Origin or Descent, 1970. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer. ....	255
Figure 5.2 Total Population: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1980. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer. ....	256
Figure 5.3 Total Population: Hispanic or Latino, 2010. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer. ....	258
Figure 6.1: Total Population: Spanish Origin or Descent, 1970. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer. ....	292

**List of Tables**

Table 2.1: San Antonio Population Growth, 1900-1940. .... 109

Table 5.1 Relationship Between District Wealth, Income, Race, and State-Local Revenue. .... 280

Table 5.2 Bexar County Districts Ranked by Equalized Property Value and Tax Rate Required to Generate Highest Yield in all Districts ..... 281

## Abstract

“Amid the Shadows of Progress: Race and the Struggle for Metropolitan Democracy in Twentieth Century San Antonio” is a political history about the contested ways in which agents of the state harnessed its powers to remake the modern American metropolis, and about how poor and working-class people created community despite the absence of the social welfare state. Using San Antonio as a case study, I trace the ways in which state actors, police, and newspapers racialized an urban neighborhood and its people thereby creating the contemporary urban *barrio*. San Antonio’s West Side had been home to ethnic Mexicans for generations; however, during a period of urbanizing and industrializing in Texas, the influx of new arrivals, many of whom were *mexicanos* from both rural Texas and Mexico, worried municipal authorities. In their zeal to contain, control, and regulate vice through policing, they established an informal vice district on the West Side and in the process created what I call the discursive *barrio* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Informed by newspapers, policing, health scares, and politicians, the discursive *barrio* was both a racialized space and place Anglos used to contain *mexicanos* on the West Side. But the *barrio* is also a physical place created by concrete public policy over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Racially restrictive covenants, federal housing policy through the Federal Housing Administration, the implementation of segregated public housing on the West Side, and urban renewal all worked together to create the physical manifestation of the *barrio*.

My dissertation sheds light upon poor and working class *mexicanos*’ everyday struggles to claim agency within a city and power structure that often relegated them to the margins. Despite racialization, segregation, and discrimination *mexicanos* persisted: people such as

Eleuterio Escobar held rallies to pressure the school board to make life a little fairer for children; often *mexicanas* organized workers into unions and held strikes to demand decent pay and safe working conditions; some fought to bring in federal funds to establish public housing to mitigate the poor living conditions in the *barrio*; Chicano/a youth activists helped to organize school walkouts and funded community action, and a few challenged the state of Texas at the U.S. Supreme Court because they believed that *every* child had a right to equal education. Those historical junctures where regular working people decided that they had had enough, along with the mundane moments that made up the tapestry of life in the *barrio*—cultivating friendships, finding love, starting a family, purchasing a home, working in the fields, sending your children to school, burying loved ones at San Fernando cemetery—worked in conjunction to cultivate a tightly knit *mexicano* community. And it was this community spirit that often served as a bulwark against a discriminatory and oppressive state in an expanding metropolis during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, my project weaves together a complicated history about contested visions of progress that take place on racially and economically stratified urban terrain. I build on the scholarship from Latino/a Studies and urban history, bringing together two historiographies that do not often speak to one another, to illustrate the richness and possibilities engendered when we broaden the scope of our scholarship to include brown people whose life experiences help subvert the black and white binary that dominates an otherwise vibrant field.

## Introduction

On October 24, 1934, local San Antonio businessman, education advocate, and League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) member, Eleuterio Escobar held a rally deep within the heart of San Antonio's segregated West Side *barrio*. Escobar wanted to highlight the degree to which the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) had discriminated against poor *mexicano* children on the West Side. From Escobar's perspective, one only had to look a few miles outside the *barrio* at the newly built Thomas Jefferson High School to notice the disparity. SAISD completed Thomas Jefferson in 1932. It sat on thirty acres of land at a cost of \$1,500,000. A 1938 *Life* magazine feature found that "it is better housed and equipped than most" other high schools across the nation. The school had "two gymnasiums, a little theatre, a cafeteria, an armory, a drill ground and more playing fields than many colleges."<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Lanier, which served as both a junior high and senior high school on the West Side, was housed on a meagre two and a half acres of land.<sup>2</sup> Segregated until the 1940s, Thomas Jefferson had boasted of small class sizes, excellent academics, and more than half its student body was college bound.<sup>3</sup> Although located only a few miles away from the *barrio*, Thomas Jefferson was a world apart.

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<sup>1</sup> "One American High School: The Thomas Jefferson of San Antonio," *Life*, March 7, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> LULAC to SAISD Board, n.d., Folder 2, Box 2, Eleuterio Escobar Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin. Hereinafter Escobar Papers.

<sup>3</sup> "One American High School."

The night of the rally was hot and humid, typical weather for San Antonio in the fall. Escobar remembered that the guest speakers talked with so much eloquence and passion that those gathered hardly noticed the heat. “The large audience was delirious and sometimes could not control their emotions,” Escobar said.<sup>4</sup> He estimated that 13,000 people had shown up in support of his efforts on behalf of West Side school children. In attendance were local notables such as Mexican American attorney, and future LULAC president, Alonso Perales; Dr. Carlos Casteñeda, a local school teacher and scholar; attorney and machine politician Carl Wright Johnson; the popular Jesuit priest of the West Side Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, Father Carmelo Tranchese; and the state school superintendent, W.W. Woods. For entertainment, Father Tranchese had his parish band play for the people in attendance.<sup>5</sup> The rally was both a celebration and a chance to hold SAISD officials’ feet to the fire.

Carl Wright Johnson, a formidable attorney and speaker, rose to speak at the podium. Wright knew how to energize a crowd. He lampooned SAISD for discriminating against West Side school children. “Some of these schools appear to me like cow corrals!” he declared. “There is no question about it that these West Side children are being deprived of an adequate education by our state school board officials and are victims of abuse and discrimination.”<sup>6</sup> His words were met with raucous cheers of agreement. Other speakers took to the podium, including a chagrined W.W. Woods who offered platitudes to the residents of the West Side that evening, but little action followed suit. In those early years, during Depression-era San Antonio, holding a rally was all that Escobar could do to advance the fight for equal education. Anglo politicians

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<sup>4</sup> Eleuterio Escobar, “Autobiography Final Draft, n.d., Folder 5, Box 1, Escobar Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Wright Johnson, as quoted by Eleuterio Escobar, “Autobiography Final Draft,” Escobar Papers.

excluded *mexicanos* from public office for the most part. LULAC was still in its formative years. Escobar did what he thought was right. He ordered a survey of West Side schools and used the data, which showed their deplorable state, to pressure politicians, officials, and school board members into action. But the rally was the first time Escobar had *organized* his community around an issue. He felt the evening was a tremendous success. It was only the beginning.<sup>7</sup>

Thirty-four years later, a small group of parents, from the same streets that hosted the Escobar rally all those years previous and which housed a school named in his honor for his commitment to equal education, filed a lawsuit in federal district court alleging that the state of Texas discriminated against poor and *mexicano* children. The players had changed, but the inequality in the *barrio* persisted. The parents—all from the Edgewood Independent School District, a small, struggling district located within the heart of the West Side—formed the Edgewood Concerned Parents Association (ECPA). The parents argued that Texas’s method of financing public schools, which relied on property tax revenue, discriminated against children from property poor schools in favor of those in wealthier school districts. They simply wanted their children to have the same quality of education that Anglo children had in other parts of town. Pervasive racial, economic, and spatial segregation in San Antonio often meant that children’s zip codes overly determined their access to resources such as quality education. The district court agreed. On December 23, 1971, the court held that Texas discriminated against poor and *mexicano* children and ordered the state to act to ameliorate the discriminatory treatment.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Texas appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. In a 5-4 decision, the

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<sup>7</sup> Eleuterio Escobar, “Autobiography Final Draft, n.d., Folder 5, Box 1, Escobar Papers.

<sup>8</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); Per Curiam Opinion, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

Court overturned the lower court ruling to the disappointment of education equality advocates across the nation. Heartbroken by the ruling, Demetrio Rodriguez, whose name was first on the class action lawsuit, told reporters that “The little man has lost again.” But he promised that, “we can still fight because we are still alive.”<sup>9</sup>

Demetrio Rodriguez’s words encapsulate the spirit of “Amid the Shadows of Progress: Race and the Struggle for Metropolitan Democracy in Twentieth Century San Antonio.” At its heart, this project is about the people who inhabited San Antonio’s West Side *barrio*. It offers a window into how *mexicanos* experienced the urbanization and growth that occurred in Texas during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My dissertation sheds light upon poor and working class *mexicanos*’ everyday struggles to claim agency within a city and power structure that often relegated them to the margins. Despite racialization, segregation, and discrimination *mexicanos* persisted: people like Eleuterio Escobar held rallies to pressure the school board to make life a little fairer for children; often *mexicanas* organized workers into unions and held strikes to demand decent pay and safe working conditions; some fought to bring in federal funds to establish public housing to mitigate the poor living conditions in the *barrio*; Chicano/a youth activists helped to organize school walkouts and funded community action, and a few challenged the state of Texas at the U.S. Supreme Court because they believed that *every* child had a right to equal education. Those historical junctures where regular working people decided that they had had enough, along with the mundane moments that made up the tapestry of life in the *barrio*—cultivating friendships, finding love, starting a family, purchasing a home, working in the fields, sending your children to school, burying loved ones at San Fernando cemetery—worked in conjunction to cultivate a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

tightly knit *mexicano* community. And it was this community spirit that often served as a bulwark against a discriminatory and oppressive state in an expanding metropolis during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This dissertation is also a national political history about the contested ways in which agents of the state harnessed its powers to remake the modern American metropolis. Using San Antonio as a case study, I trace the ways in which state actors, police, and newspapers racialized an urban neighborhood and its people thereby creating the contemporary urban *barrio*. San Antonio's West Side had been home to ethnic Mexicans for generations; however, during a period of urbanizing and industrializing in Texas, the influx of new arrivals, many of whom were *mexicanos* from both rural Texas and Mexico, worried municipal authorities. In their zeal to contain, control, and regulate vice through policing, they established an informal vice district on the West Side and in the process created what I call the discursive *barrio* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Informed by newspapers, policing, health scares, and politicians, the discursive *barrio* was both a racialized space and place Anglos used to contain *mexicanos* on the West Side. But the *barrio* is also a physical place created by concrete public policy over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Racially restrictive covenants, federal housing policy through the Federal Housing Administration, the implementation of segregated public housing on the West Side, and urban renewal all worked together to create the physical manifestation of the *barrio*.

The dissertation spans much of the twentieth century but focuses its narrative mostly on the 1930s through the 1970s. This was a period of rapid urbanization for the nation and the city. Between 1900-1990, the city of San Antonio's population increased from 53,321 to 935,927. Much of that growth occurred during the interwar period and immediately after World War II. San Antonio's *mexicano* population followed similar growth patterns. In 1900, fewer than

15,000 *mexicanos* called San Antonio home, by 1940 that number had increased to 103,000, and by 1990, nearly 517,974 ethnic Mexicans lived in San Antonio. San Antonio's African American population has always been relatively small and located primarily on the East Side. In 1900, the black population of San Antonio was 7,538 and by 1990, that number increased to 65,852.<sup>10</sup> The rapid urbanization of San Antonio meant that the municipal government, through various agencies such as the Health Department or the San Antonio Housing Authority, created and implemented policy that had direct effects on the lives of the city's residents. This dissertation looks at the way *mexicanos* encountered aspects of the state in twentieth century San Antonio.

During this period, despite the numbers of ethnic Mexicans living in the city, Anglos were overrepresented in positions of authority in the San Antonio municipal government. Indeed, between 1955 and 1971, the pro-business, Anglo-dominated, Good Government League (GGL) controlled the city's growth agenda and politics by backing groups of candidates for city council. During those years, by manipulating an at-large system of representation, the GGL won 77 of 81 city council seats.<sup>11</sup> As such, these moments of friction—of choice—on how to distribute resources of the state mattered a great deal. Moreover, during the formative postwar years, the GGL's stranglehold on politics meant that they often prioritized the needs of the Anglo-dominated North Side while allowing the West Side to languish. But the hegemony of Anglo

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<sup>10</sup> T.N. Picnot, *An Economic and Industrial Survey of San Antonio, Texas* (1942), 168; U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census of Population: Social and Economic Characteristics of Texas, Table 7, Race and Hispanic Origin, <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cp2/cp-2-45-1.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> John A. Booth and David R. Johnson, "Power and Progress in San Antonio Politics, 1836-1970," in John A. Booth and David R. Johnson, eds., *The Politics of San Antonio: Community, Progress, and Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 23.

power extended beyond City Hall and into the school boards and neighborhoods that often had a say in constructing the “unequal metropolis.”<sup>12</sup>

This dissertation takes Vicky Ruiz’s call to action at the 2006 Organization of American Historians annual meeting seriously. In her presidential address, she proclaimed, “Nuestra América es historia americana. Our America *is* American history.”<sup>13</sup> It is a statement, and rebuke, that is both necessary and profound. While historians have done crucial and important work on race in the U.S. in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often it is done through a black and white lens that hinders our ability to fully appreciate the complex and historically contingent nature of race and race relations in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Ruiz understands that racialization in the United States is

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<sup>12</sup> Here I am borrowing a term from Ansley Erickson, *Making the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Vicky Ruiz, “Nuestra América: Latino History as United States History,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 3 (December 2006), 672. For a sampling of works that illustrate how Mexican American history helps complicate U.S. history, especially as it relates to identity formation, see Gabriela Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-1939* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity. Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Elizabeth Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican Women on the World War II Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013) and Escobedo, “The Pachuca Panic: Sexual and Cultural Battlegrounds in World War II Los Angeles,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2007); Anthony Mora, *Border Dilemmas: Racial and National Uncertainties in New Mexico, 1848-1912* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Vicky Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> For a sampling of works that approach race comparatively, see Brian Behnken, *Fighting their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Wendy Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013); Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiethnic Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Gordon Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

not a monolithic phenomenon. As one moves across the country, the racial logics embedded in specific locales may differ. Racialization as a process is historically contingent and spatially dependent, as Laura Pulido illustrates in *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*. For example, prior to 1948, many San Antonio homes had racially restrictive covenants included on the deeds that ostensibly prevented sale to anyone other than Anglos. However, because Latinos/as often operated in a liminal space *between* legal and extra-legal segregation because of ambiguous whiteness for some, middle-class Latinos/as were sometimes able to successfully navigate through those waters. Or, as Jerry González has found in his own work on the Los Angeles suburbs, “Mexican Americans, though ostensibly nonwhite, acquired greater access to postwar suburban housing than African Americans or Asian Americans.”<sup>15</sup> While the focus of this dissertation does not delve too deeply into the “whiteness” debate in the Latino/a Studies community, it does appreciate the contingent nature of identity. My findings reinforce the scholars who see *mexicanos* operating in a space that is neither white nor black.<sup>16</sup> In practice, this meant that some Latinos/as received some of the benefits of whiteness because of their class

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<sup>15</sup> Jerry González, *In Search of Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 9.

<sup>16</sup> For some scholars who believe that Mexican Americans embraced whiteness, see for example: Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Foley, “Partly Colored or Other White: Mexican Americans and Their Problem with the Color Line,” in *Beyond Black and White: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest*, eds. Stephanie Cole and Alison M. Parker (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2004); Thomas Guglielmo, “Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006); For a counterpoint, see Carlos Blanton, *George I. Sánchez: The Long Fight for Mexican American Integration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Benjamin Johnson, “The Cosmic Race in Texas: Racial Fusion, White Supremacy, and Civil Rights Politics,” *The Journal of American History* 98, no 2 (September 2001); some scholars have focused on the legal aspects on whiteness and Mexican Americans, see Ignacio M García, *White but Not Equal: Mexican Americans, Jury Discrimination, and the Supreme Court* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009); Ian Hanley López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Lopez, *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr, *Brown not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001); For a nuanced sociological take on the question of how Mexican Americans self-conceptualize, see Julie Dowling, *Mexican Americans and the Question of Race* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

status or lighter skin tone. It also meant that some Latinos/as had to go to the back of the restaurant to order their meals in West Texas if they could not “pass.”<sup>17</sup> Latinos/as had to negotiate whiteness in order to live in the United States, a place, in many ways, defined by its long history of racial exclusion. Most Latinos/as could not escape the pitfalls that come with being brown within the United States’ racial hierarchy. As important, embracing a whiteness did not mean rejecting one’s cultural heritage. Overall, the question of self-conceptualization is complicated and depends on “citizenship status, class mobility, region, language, and skin color.”<sup>18</sup>

Over the past twenty years, urban historians have told complex histories about the ways in which structure and agency are mediated within the urban environment. The canonical example of this is Tom Sugrue’s masterful *Origins of the Urban Crisis*. Sugrue argues that “economic and racial inequality constrain individual and family choices. They set the limits of human agency. Within the bounds of the possible, individuals and families resist, adapt, or succumb.”<sup>19</sup> This dissertation builds on scholars who see the relationship between structure and agency as dialectical.<sup>20</sup> People in San Antonio’s West Side *barrio* worked to create change as

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> González, *In Search of Mexican Beverly Hills*, quote from Footnote 27.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>20</sup> For a sampling of relatively recent trends in urban history, see Nathan Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); Lily Geismer, *Don’t Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jerry González, *In Search of Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017); Andrew Highsmith, *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan, and the Fate of the American Metropolis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*

best they could; however, they often came up against structural barriers such as housing segregation, public housing policy that was more about slum clearance and removal than providing adequate shelter for poor and working-class residents, or white racial antipathy that constrained their ability to ameliorate the economic inequality produced by capitalism.

This project also adds to the growing work of scholars such as Lilia Fernandez in *Brown in the Windy City: Mexican and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* who forefront the experience of Latinos/as in their scholarship to destabilize the black and white analytical lens that too often frames our understanding of race in the U.S. while simultaneously bringing a Latino Studies sensibility to the urban history framework. This is not to say that Latino/a Studies has never done urban history or vice versa, but both historiographies would benefit from engaging more explicitly with one another. Indeed, some of the earliest works in Chicano studies were urban studies that this dissertation builds upon. For example, Albert Camarillo's *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* and David Montejano's *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* both illustrate how the introduction and expansion of American capitalism into the Southwest disrupted the lives of ethnic Mexicans in California and Texas, respectively, as it forced some into a wage-labor role for the first time. Both studies also illustrate the ways in which Anglos exploited the labor of ethnic Mexicans as workers while racism, discrimination, and segregation circumscribed their movements in their new urban environments.<sup>21</sup>

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(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Margaret Pugh O'Mara, *Cities of Knowledge Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*.

<sup>21</sup> Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara*

Subsequent generations of scholars asked different questions about the built environment and the people who inhabit these spaces, especially as it relates to identity formation. George Sánchez's canonical *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles* illuminates the ways in which *mexicano* immigrants made cultural adaptations over time that eventually resulted in a new type of identity.<sup>22</sup> One of the strengths of the scholarship in the new urban history is that those scholars have expanded our thinking about the state, how it operated, and the effects a "coercive state" had on people and communities. Urban political historians have focused on policy.

But, taking Fernandez's lead, it is time we remember that people populate cities and their voices are critical if we are to make sense of the world around us.<sup>23</sup> This is why throughout my dissertation, I incorporate oral history into the narrative to add depth and texture to this community study. Many of the oral histories used in this dissertation come from my public history experience while working as a graduate research assistant at the Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project (CRBB). My partner and I crisscrossed the state of Texas and recorded over eighty testimonios of former activists who sought to make their communities a better place. By building on scholars who have consciously chosen to explicitly connect an urban history framework that looks at structure and state action with a historiography that has enriched

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*and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3-4; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Here I borrow from Nora Krinitsky, "The Politics of Crime Control: Race, Policing, and Reform in Twentieth Century Chicago," PhD diss, (University of Michigan, 2017), 10. Krinitsky defines the coercive state as "one that prioritizes social order and the maintenance of social hierarchy as the primary mode through which to express state legitimacy and exercise state power, while also relying on public-private partnerships to provide social services and surveillance and to augment state capacities to compel lawfulness and adherence to respectable norms of behavior."

our understanding of race, identity, and culture, and an oral history methodology that incorporates the voices of everyday people, this dissertation seeks to illustrate the ways in which both external and internal forces impacted the lives of *mexicanos* in San Antonio's West Side barrio.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, instead of seeing the "urban crisis" as a declension narrative that Sugrue describes in his work in Detroit, in some place's Latinos/as have reinvigorated U.S. cities.<sup>25</sup> The same is true for San Antonio. While *mexicanos* have always lived in Texas and San Antonio, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century when an influx of *mexicanos* moved to the city looking for work during a period of increased economic growth, working class *mexicanos* largely provided the labor that would literally build the city. Latinos/as contributed to its growth and development despite the discrimination they often faced in the housing and job markets.

While "Amid the Shadows of Progress" is chiefly concerned with working class and poor *mexicanos* located on the West Side *barrio* as they encountered the state over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I do not want to flatten a dynamic community. The West Side has always been diverse, and that is especially true as it relates to class. Structural barriers in the housing market,

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<sup>24</sup> For some recent examples of this approach, see Gabriela Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-1939* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Jerry González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Sandoval-Strausz, "Latino Landscapes: Postwar Cities and the Transnational Origins of a New Urban America," *Journal of American History*, 101, no. 3 (Dec. 2014), 807. The transnational approach that Sandoval-Strausz argues for in his piece, and, indeed what Vicky Ruiz argued for in hers, is crucial, but beyond the scope of my dissertation. See, Geraldo Cadava, *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Benjamin Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Anthony Mora, *Border Dilemmas: Racial and National Uncertainties in New Mexico, 1848-1912* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Andrew Sandoval-Strausz and Nancy Kwak, eds *Making Cities Global: The Transnational Turn in Urban History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

informed by racial discrimination, in the twentieth century often constrained *mexicanos*' ability to purchase homes outside the West Side *barrio*. This meant that middle class and working class *mexicanos* lived together in a relatively small neighborhood. Richard Garcia's *The Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* traces the class differentiation that occurred on the West Side during Depression-era San Antonio. He also illustrates the creation of a Mexican American identity formed "within the crucible of urbanization and industrialization in the Southwest in general and San Antonio in particular."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) actively attempted to "shift the consciousness of Mexicans in the West Side" to become "Mexican in culture but American in politics and philosophy."<sup>27</sup>

Throughout my project, I offer some insight into the world of middle-class *mexicano* politics. For example, LULAC lifetime member, and businessman, Eleuterio Escobar represented a middle-class politics of his generation. Escobar believed the best way to ameliorate the deleterious effects of racial discrimination ethnic Mexicans experienced was by changing the hearts and minds of Anglos. And the best way to effectuate that change was through education. But in his desire to create a fairer school system for ethnic Mexican children on the West Side, Escobar did not differentiate between Mexican nationals and Mexican American children. As such, my project builds on the work of scholars who seek to complicate LULAC's history within the historiography. Recognizing the problematic nature of LULAC's emphasis on Mexican American identity, middle class *mexicanos* navigated the sociocultural and political terrain as best they could despite the racial and economic inequality that often informed and circumscribed

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Garcia, *The Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 11.

their decisions.<sup>28</sup> For someone like Emma Tenayuca, a *mexicana* labor organizer in San Antonio, the way to address economic inequality was through organizing workers.<sup>29</sup> Neither of these approaches are “wrong,” they are simply different approaches to mitigating the effects of economic inequality. But Escobar’s social location as a middle-class business owner shaped how he experienced race and racism on the West Side and influenced how he sought to challenge the status quo. The same was true for Emma Tenayuca whose experiences as a working-class *mexicana* informed her politics. Whereas Escobar’s brand of activism brought him acclaim from San Antonio society, Emma Tenayuca’s direct-action, worker-led protests and strikes brought opprobrium and vitriol from the San Antonio police. In this respect, Tenayuca’s gender, race, and class influenced how she was perceived because she transgressed the boundaries of “acceptable” protest for a *mexicana* based upon middle-class notions of respectability.

During the Civil Rights era in San Antonio, two groups attempted to thwart the GGL stranglehold on local electoral politics by forming coalitions of their own. In 1959, a broad-based coalition of middle-class West Side and South Side *mexicanos*, middle class African Americans from the East Side, and North Side white liberals created the Bexar County Democratic Coalition (BCDC). Collectively they understood that the only way to beat the GGL in an at-large election was to form a coalition, organize neighborhoods, and nominate a slate of candidates of their own. The BCDC “represented a social movement that organized around issues which challenged the business orientation of local political institutions.”<sup>30</sup> Importantly, they wanted to create change

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<sup>28</sup> For a nuanced take on LULAC, see Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*.

<sup>29</sup> My dissertation builds on the work of labor historians such as Vicky Ruiz’s *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 103.

by reforming the Democratic Party in Texas. In 1969, another group of activists would form the Committee for Barrio Betterment (CBB). The CBB reflected the rise of the Chicano Movement and its focus was advancing their own slate of candidates from the *barrio*, Rosie Castro of *La Raza Unida* and Mario Compean from the Mexican American Youth Organization, for example. For the CBB, the pathway to greater political representation was not through the Democratic Party but creating an alternative to the two-party system, La Raza Unida.<sup>31</sup> Both groups had similar goals in this respect, but they had differing strategies on how to get there. Importantly, in San Antonio, class matters, and it informed how some people articulated and formulated an oppositional politics. As Max Krochmal argues, “*Mexicanos* in Texas failed to unite because their common experiences of discrimination based on color and national origin were not always enough to overcome their internal differences. As with African Americans, class, ideology, and organizing strategies and tactics all mattered at least as much as did ties of race or ethnicity.”<sup>32</sup> My dissertation does not seek to reify artificial boundary lines between the Mexican American generation’s middle-class struggle for civil rights on one hand and the Chicano Movement’s activism on the other; rather, I suggest that both groups—and people more broadly—respond differently to structural forces that circumscribed their lives and livelihoods.

This study builds on a rich tradition of scholarship that sees community and identity formation as a dialectical rather than a static process—a process that is constantly negotiated and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 96. For a broader discussion on the Bexar County Democratic Coalition, see Rosales, ch. 4-6; Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas*; David Montejano, *Quixote’s Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981*; José Angel Gutiérrez, *Albert A. Peña, Jr: Dean of Chicano Politics* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 410.

contested.<sup>33</sup> Thus, even as the city's Anglo political elite attempted to remake the city into a "modern metropolis" in the 1950s and 1960s using urban renewal that erased the presence of *mexicanos* from the political and economic arena, *mexicano* cultural traditions nevertheless became an integral part of that process. For example, one of the city's proudest moments occurred when boosters won the bid to host the World's Fair in San Antonio in 1968, the first World's Fair in the nation's Southwest. Selling San Antonio as a "confluence of civilizations" and the gateway to Latin America, the white business elite commodified a whitewashed version of *mexicano* cultural heritage in the form of cultural tourism. Despite the commodification of certain aspects of *mexicano* cultural traditions, many remained uniquely their own. Two good examples were mariachi and conjunto music. These two *mexicano* cultural expression changed over time, and become ubiquitous within the cultural milieu of San Antonio, but remained distinctly *mexicano* cultural expressions despite attempts to co-opt these expressions from above. As Juan Tejada, founder of the annual Conjunto Festival (currently in its 38<sup>th</sup> year) says, conjunto music was "created in Tejas" by Tejanos" and "helped to reinforce our culture and cultural identity." Music helped to "bring our people together to affirm our existence."<sup>34</sup>

Anglo accommodation to ethnic Mexican pressure in the political realm also occurred, unevenly, over the second half of the twentieth century. After San Antonio's failed annexation

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<sup>33</sup> Matt Garcia, *A World of its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 4-5. For a sampling of other works see space as constantly negotiated terrain, see for example: Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Jerry González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017); Anthony Mora, *Border Dilemmas: Racial and National Uncertainties in New Mexico, 1848-1912* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Juan Tejada, interview by Vinicio Sintá and Stephen Arionus, June 2016. The Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/> (and in possession of author).

attempt to dilute the *mexicano* vote in 1977, the U.S. Justice Department pressured the city to change the way it handled local elections by adopting single member districts in lieu of at-large voting. The hope was that single member districts would make the council more democratic, responsive, and representative of its constituency. By then Bexar County, of which San Antonio is the largest city and county seat, was 46.6% percent ethnic Mexican (460,911 of a total population of 988,00).<sup>35</sup> While the Justice Department and the amended Voting Rights Act provided the ultimate pressure to expand metropolitan democracy in San Antonio, Chicanos/as in the community pressured the city council to be more inclusive and representative. This dissertation will explore the ways in which similar negotiations over power took place over the course of the twentieth century in San Antonio.<sup>36</sup>

“Amid the Shows of Progress” also builds on the important work of history of education scholars such as Ansley Erickson who remind us that the construction of inequality in education and urban space is a two-way street. Erickson argues, “the causal roots of education inequality . . . can be found in the interactions between the schools and the basic political and economic structures of the city.” Moreover, schools “were not simply pawns in a changing and challenging urban and metropolitan context: they helped shape that context.”<sup>37</sup> Erickson’s book is a textbook

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<sup>35</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Total Population, Bexar County, Texas, 1980. Prepared by Social Explorer, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C1980/R12141831> (accessed 5/1/2018). San Antonio is the largest city in Bexar County and its seat. Ethnic Mexicans have always comprised the largest minority population in San Antonio. The African American population was 69,201 (7%), and the Anglo population was 446,540 (45.2%).

<sup>36</sup> Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San*, 137-138; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1938* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 292-293; Charles Cotrell and R. Michael Stevens, “The 1975 Voting Rights Act and San Antonio, Texas: Toward a Federal Guarantee of a Republican Form of Government,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 8, no 1 (Winter 1978), p 79.

<sup>37</sup> Ansley Erickson, *Building the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016). For scholars who study the history of education and the fight for educational equality in a Latino context see, for example, Carlos Blanton, *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 2004); Mario T. García, *Blowout! Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Gilbert González, *Chicano Education in the*

example of how one would apply an urban history eye to another subdiscipline. One of the most important contributions Erickson brings to the table is her discussion of inequality as a *process* that is constantly remade. White flight and disinvestment did not alone create inequality in education but were helped along by “the school district, federal courts, and local officials [who] *remade* inequality by giving more weight to the felt needs and interests of local white students, families, and neighborhoods than to black students, families, and neighborhoods.”<sup>38</sup> In my analysis of the *Rodriguez* case, for example, I tease out the ways in which ideology of “local control” informs Justice Powell’s majority opinion. For Powell, the Court did not have the constitutional authority to interfere in how states chose to fund public education. He believed that was a local matter. As urban historians have illustrated, the state helped create a white suburban homeowner political identity based on the colorblind meritocratic belief in the free market. Homeowner property rights were sovereign, and parents had every right to send their children to neighborhood schools; they had worked hard to purchase a home in a “good” neighborhood within a “good” school district.<sup>39</sup> Justice Powell’s decision based, in part, on local control privileged white, affluent homeowners at the expense of poor, *mexicano* homeowners. Poor parents could not tax their way out of a cyclical pattern of inequality: in Texas, the state set a maximum tax rate that school districts could impose on households within their boundaries and

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*Segregation Era* (Philadelphia: Balch Institute Press, 1990); Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001) and San Miguel, Jr., “*Let Them All Take Heed*”: *Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Richard R. Valencia, *Chicano Students and the Courts: The Mexican American Legal Struggle for Educational Equality* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Erickson, *Building the Unequal Metropolis*, p. 304.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Lassiter, *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*; Freund, *Colored Property*; Self, *American Babylon*.

the value of homes within poor districts did not generate enough revenue to fund schools within a property poor district adequately. In San Antonio, this type of homeowner politics can be seen in the short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful battle to expand public housing in neighborhoods outside the *barrio* through an innovative strategy called Turnkey III, which envisioned broadening homeownership for low-income residents in a type of rent-to-own endeavor. The San Antonio Housing Authority had to terminate Turnkey III before it could get off the ground because of the pushback from white homeowners across the city who were concerned about low-income residents moving into “their” neighborhoods.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter One explores the ways in which Anglos in San Antonio understood the West Side *barrio* and the *mexicanos* who inhabited it. The initial section sets up the broader context for *mexicanos* in Texas during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It details work and immigration experiences to illustrate the different types of people who eventually made their way to San Antonio because it was the cultural hub of the *mexicano* experience in Texas. The city also served as an access point to the northern and western agricultural fields, so it was very much a vibrant place during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I also examine how Anglos perceived the *mexicanos* who came into the city. The first chapter asks the broad questions how did vice, disease, and policing operate in San Antonio during this period? And what effect did it have on the creation of what I call the discursive *barrio*?

If the first chapter was the outside looking in, Chapter Two investigates the *barrio* from the inside out. It explores the lives of everyday people and seeks to understand how *mexicanos* dealt with the shifting demographics, the urbanization, and the endemic poverty that pervaded

the West Side during the Depression era. I begin the chapter with an examination of some of the debates in Washington, D.C. surrounding immigration and the so-called “Mexican Problem.” Then I move the reader back to the *barrio* to illuminate the ways in which everyday people helped fashion community as resistance despite Anglos racialization of *mexicanos* during this period. For example, Mexican Americans created the League of United Latin American Citizens (1929), Eleuterio Escobar helped found the Association of Independent Voters (1932) and the School Improvement League (1934).

The third chapter examines the public housing debate that occurred during the New Deal. It explores some of the work of Catherine Bauer who was an instrumental figure in getting the Wagner-Steagall Housing bill passed. I then bring the focus back to San Antonio to analyze the indefatigable spirit of a priest at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on the West Side. Father Carmelo Tranchese fought tooth and nail to bring public housing in San Antonio because of the deplorable conditions in which *mexicanos* on the West Side lived. This chapter asks to what extent did public housing improve the lives of *mexicanos* and to what extent did the public housing policy disrupt their lives, especially since the initial five developments in San Antonio were racially segregated.

Chapter Four takes the story to San Antonio’s City Hall during a period when the Anglo elite replaced the Democratic machine with a much more malleable pro-growth machine they could control. Like many cities across the nation during the 1950s, San Antonio’s white political elite used “slum clearance” and urban renewal to promote a policy agenda that largely benefitted white Anglos on the north and northwest part of town but left *mexicanos* on the West Side behind. In 1968, boosters brought the World’s Fair to San Antonio, and they did so by promoting a commodified and whitewashed version of *mexicano* cultural heritage for profit.

Finally, Chapter Five investigates the politics of education in San Antonio. It begins with the 1968 Edgewood Walkouts that were inspired by Chicano/a activists working in the city to further their broader political ambitions. Despite that, the walkouts remained student-led. They protested the lack of educational equality in the Edgewood school district. From the streets of the West Side, the story then moves to the U.S. Supreme Court. Inspired by the students' activism, a small group of Edgewood parents demanded to know why their children received a substandard education. Their desire to see justice done for their children led to *Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District* (1969) a case that had the potential to dramatically reshape how Texas funded public education. I then bring the story back to the *barrio* to explore key themes that the *Rodriguez* case brought to light: the state's role in creating educational inequality, SAISD's role in maintaining that inequality, and the manifestation of white homeowner politics that condoned the inequality.

### **A Note on Terminology**

Throughout the dissertation, I try to be attentive in how I describe individuals, especially those who lived on the West Side of San Antonio. I attempt to remain true to how my subjects would self-identify, if possible. I recognize that identity is fluid and the language scholars use to categorize and label people is often imperfect. I use broad identifiers such as *mexicano* or *mexicanos* to describe working class people of Mexican descent, both men and women, living in the United States irrespective of citizenship status. I recognize the problematic elision of *mexicanas* that occurs when using the plural male form of the Spanish word. If I am speaking about a group of women of Mexican descent, I will use *mexicana* or *mexicanas*. Unless it is at the beginning of a sentence, I do not capitalize the term *mexicano* because that is how it would appear in Spanish. I use David Gutiérrez's term, "Ethnic Mexican" to serve a similar purpose to

*mexicano* when speaking about a large group of heterogeneous people.<sup>40</sup> Sometimes I will use the two terms interchangeably for the stylistic or readability purposes. I use “Mexican American” to identify a specific cohort of individuals who came of age between the 1930s and 1960s as described by Mario T. García in *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960*.<sup>41</sup> I try to avoid using the term Latino/a or Latinos/as unless I am referring to the contemporary moment. I use the terms Chicano, Chicana, Chicanos, and/or Chicanas to describe individuals who used that term purposely as a non-white, political identity during the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s-1970s. I do not use the terms “Tejano” or “Hispanic.”<sup>42</sup>

I use Anglo interchangeably for white although I recognize the flattening that occurs in the process.

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<sup>40</sup> David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 430. Footnote two. Krochmal’s framing of the question of identity, naming, and word choice as it relates to ethnic Mexicans helped me think about the importance of the scholarly gaze, especially when it comes to naming subjects in my own work.

## Chapter 1

### Mapping the Discursive *Barrio*: Space, Disease, Identity, and Policing

“Si eres tan pobre que duermes en el piso no te vas a caer al piso.”<sup>1</sup>

As a young politician in the 1950s & 1960s, Jose Maria “Joe” Bernal used that slogan to connect with his constituents located deep on the West Side of San Antonio, the heavily ethnic Mexican *barrio* and cultural heart of the Mexican American community. Bernal understood what other politicians—especially Anglo politicians—did not. Because they lacked the material or political wealth of their Anglo counterparts, the only place for them, as a people, to go was up. It was an affirmative statement of progress within their community. When you had so little, you have nothing to lose. That ethos propelled Joe Bernal to great heights: he left San Antonio’s West Side as an enlisted man to serve in the waning moments of World War II. Upon returning he used his veteran’s benefits to go to school and to buy a home. He worked as an educator and coach, he earned a PhD from the University of Texas, and would ultimately become both a state representative and senator for Texas.

But, like many of his constituents, Joe Bernal was of the West Side. He grew up poor. As a child from a large family, he literally slept on dirt floors. His family often moved from one house to another on the West Side, never settling into a place for long because his family lacked the financial wherewithal to purchase a home of their own. They rented one dilapidated house

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Bernal, Interviewed by José Angel Gutiérrez, April 17, 2003, Tejano Voices Oral History Collection. University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, <http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/interview.php?cmasno=169>. The translation is “if you are so poor as to sleep on the floor then you will never fall to the floor.” Hereinafter as Tejano Voices Interview.

after another. He called the streets of Montezuma, San Patricio, Torreon, and Saunders—all deep West Side—his home. He laughed when people described those streets as boulevards because the spacious tree-lined thoroughfares such descriptors conjured were far from reality. They were more akin to alleys than proper streets. Unlike other parts of the city, many of the West Side roads were dirt roads, not paved. But “as far as [I was] concerned, it’s my boulevard,” he recalled. He fished in the Alazan and Apache creeks that cut through the West Side and overflowed after a rainstorm, turning the West Side into a flooded, muddy mess. The West Side lacked proper planning to deal with the excess water that inundated the neighborhood after moderate rainfall.

Nevertheless, like others from the West Side, he took pride in his neighborhood. It was home. To be from the West Side represented more than a geographical location or neighborhood. To be from the West Side meant claiming an identity. The distinctiveness of that identity grew over the course of the twentieth century as the borders of the West Side *barrio* expanded through racial, economic, and social exclusion that worsened in the postwar period. For many, it was an integral part of who they were. In part that identity was forged from the social and economic marginalization of being brown in a city whose power center had been long dominated by Anglos. Cut off from the levers of power, ethnic Mexicans on the West Side had to look within and create social service organizations that filled in the gaps where the city’s services did not reach. Mutual aid societies and outreach programs by the Catholic Church also helped in this regard. In short, West Side residents created community.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bernal, April 23, 2003, Tejano Voices Interview.

But that identity was also an oppositional identity forged, in part, from the negative view's Anglos harbored of both the West Side and the ethnic Mexicans who resided there. For them it was a slum. A place of ill repute. San Antonio's red-light district was located on the West Side. It was a place of vice. A place of disease. A place of poverty. By extension, the people who lived in the area were all those things. In other words, Anglos from outside the *barrio* projected racialized understandings of *mexicanness* onto the neighborhood's inhabitants. The conditions found therein served as a confirmation of such sophistry. Few, if any, Anglos saw the relationship between social policy and the conditions on the West Side. West Side *mexicanos* had to contend with what historian Max Krochmal calls Juan Crow—the exclusion from public and political space as well as the racialized pathologies ascribed onto their community by Anglos. Thus, when Joe Bernal stated: “*si eres tan pobre que duermes en el piso no te vas caer al piso,*” people understood him. What he saw as the “state and condition of the community” was, and could be, temporary. For him, being at the bottom—and poverty itself—was a temporary state of being. However, to shift that paradigm required disrupting the status quo. It meant advocating for change. It meant not ceding ground to Anglos who sought the further marginalization of ethnic Mexicans. By (re)claiming the West Side as their own, ethnic Mexicans on the West Side began the process of reclamation. The rejection of the slum narrative was the first step in that process.

### **1.1 Population Growth and the Immigrant Experience**

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, San Antonio experienced phenomenal population growth. Between 1900-1940, San Antonio's overall population grew from 53,000 to 254,000. Its small African American population expanded from 7,538 to 19,325. Most astonishing was the growth in the ethnic Mexican community. Between that same period, that community increased

from 13,722 to 103,000 accounting for nearly half of San Antonio's overall population growth during this period of expansion.<sup>3</sup> San Antonio has long had a large ethnic Mexican population, but three interrelated processes served to bolster that community's population during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first process that occurred was political instability brought on by the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the Cristero Rebellion during President Plutarco Elías Calles' regime. Some of the antecedents for the Mexican Revolution occurred during the period immediately preceding known as the *Porfiriato* (1876-1911). In his attempt to modernize the Mexican economy, Mexican President Porfirio Díaz opened his country up to foreign investment in agriculture, mining, oil, and railroads. The introduction of the railroads, which connected Mexico's hinterland with U.S. markets "caused agricultural, livestock, timber, and mining land values to skyrocket and brought about a transformation in the land tenure system through foreclosures and seizures that resulted."<sup>4</sup> This meant that millions of *campesinos* (Mexican peasant farmers) went from rural farmers to landless peasants who sought work and a better life where they could. Many would seek better lives north of the U.S.-Mexico border. According to historian Richard Garcia, the political instability in Mexico forced many affluent and middle class *mexicanos* north. Since San Antonio had a well-established ethnic Mexican community, it made sense for these migrants to make their home in San Antonio.<sup>5</sup> This group of exiled

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<sup>3</sup> T. N. Picnot, *An Economic and Industrial Survey of San Antonio, Texas* (1942), Rare books Collection, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, 168. Hereinafter cited as *An Economic and Industrial Survey*.

<sup>4</sup> John Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and the Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 157.

<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class : San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 35.

*mexicanos* became the backbone of the ethnic Mexican middle class that developed in San Antonio during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second, perhaps more central process that transformed San Antonio's landscape was a shift in Texas's economy in the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century under Mexican, Texan, and eventually U.S. rule, ethnic Mexicans enjoyed some sense of political power within the city. However, during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the U.S.-Mexican War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), the influx of Anglos into Texas changed that dynamic. As David Montejano has argued, the rise of Anglo commercial farming throughout South Texas displaced the traditional rancher economy in which *mexicanos* and Americans of Mexican descent both thrived. The entrance of commercialized farming also brought with it the aspect of low paid, agricultural, wage labor. No longer *vaqueros* (cowboys)—a skilled profession—many ethnic Mexicans became wage agricultural laborers. Thus, at the turn of the century, the shifting Texas economy was rapidly industrializing and urbanizing. The type of skilled labor that *mexicanos* enjoyed had been supplanted by agricultural wage labor where they now worked on commercial farms owned by Anglos.<sup>6</sup>

Mechanization of the agricultural industry only exacerbated the economic position of ethnic Mexicans.<sup>7</sup> The displacement of agricultural workers only increased the incentive to move to urban areas like San Antonio in search of work. Agricultural workers from the spinach and citrus farms of Texas's Winter Garden area and the sheep ranching communities in Uvalde County

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas: 1836-1986*, especially Chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> Picnot, *An Economic and Industrial Survey*, 171.

moved to San Antonio in search of work. San Antonio's proximity to Mexico and its large, established ethnic Mexican community also meant that it served as a labor recruitment center for commercial farms in the Midwest and Western United States. Thus, a segment of the agricultural labor pool that moved to San Antonio during this period became migrant laborers who left San Antonio several months throughout the year to work in the fields in other states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Montana, and Colorado. According to Richard Garcia, the bulk of these working-class immigrants moved to San Antonio during the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> Other Mexican immigrants saw San Antonio as sort of a way station before they moved north or West to California but did not settle in San Antonio for long. Between 1926 and 1927, the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio captured the life histories of some of the immigrants who left their homeland in search of work in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Jesús Garza of Aguascalientes passed through San Antonio looking for better economic opportunities. He crossed the border at Nuevo Laredo and booked passage to San Antonio where he found a labor contractor who put him to work with the railroad. Garza accepted the work, but it proved to be tough. "I worked all day," Garza recalled. "I could hardly finish out working that first day, I thought I was going to die because the work was so hard."<sup>10</sup> Garza did not stay working on the *traque* for too long. He eventually found work in Dallas at a restaurant working as a vegetable peeler. The wages he earned were not much, but they allowed him to find a place

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<sup>8</sup> Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Manuel Gamio, *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931); Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: a Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971).

to live and it was better than working on the railroad. Garza found Dallas preferable to San Antonio because of the higher wages.<sup>11</sup>

Elías Garza had a similar experience. Newly married to a woman from San Antonio who had two kids from a previous marriage, he and his new family decided to move to Mexico but quickly decided against that because of the political instability they found in Michoacán. They then made their way back to San Antonio where a labor contractor offered them a position picking cotton in the Rio Grande Valley. Having few other prospects, Garza and his family made the trek to the Valley courtesy of the labor contractor. Upon arrival at the migrant labor camp, however, Garza became quickly disenchanted. The Anglo farm owner offered to put up the Garzas in a chicken coop that was exposed to the elements. Not wanting to expose his family to such conditions, Garza offered the farmer an ultimatum. If he did not provide better living conditions, Garza would pack up his family and leave. With the abundant labor supply on the side of the farmer, Garza was not in a good position to bargain. As he and his family attempted to leave, however, the farmer demanded payment for the transport out to the Valley from San Antonio. Garza refused to pay. The farmer brought the local sheriff in to pressure the Garza family with threats of enforced bondage. Garza recalled, “He took me to the jail and there the planter told them that I wanted to leave without paying him for my passage. He charged me twice the cost of the transportation. . . . I couldn’t do anything. The authorities would only pay attention to him, and as they were in league with him they told me that if I didn’t pay they would take my wife and little children to work.”<sup>12</sup> Having no other recourse, Garza acquiesced to the farmer’s extortion. The planter’s use of local law enforcement to pressure laborers had a long

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<sup>11</sup> Gamio, *The Mexican Immigrant*, 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

history in Texas. Mexican agricultural workers often saw local sheriffs as well as the Texas Rangers as little more than a privatized police force to do the bidding of the farmers.

These two stories were typical of many immigrants coming through San Antonio. Because of its proximity to Mexico, labor recruitment agencies scouted for workers on the surrounding farmland or up North. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, San Antonio was a way station between Mexico and the rest of the United States for many Mexican migrants. Some stayed only a brief time in San Antonio as their sojourns took them to other cities in the United States, and some established more permanent roots alongside ethnic Mexicans who had long called San Antonio and Texas their homes. But during this period, along with Los Angeles, San Antonio was a central hub of *mexicano* cultural identity in the United States because, at least in part, of its long history with Mexico, its proximity, and the vibrant cultural community on San Antonio's West Side. Awash with an influx of immigrants from Mexico and other areas of Texas, these migratory pathways would forever shape San Antonio as people passed through, interacted with one another, or made San Antonio home.

## **1.2 The Construction of the *Barrio* and the Vice District**

The creation of the contemporary *barrio* was a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic enclaves in San Antonio existed. These were spaces where *mexicanos* lived, worked, and loved. The "Latin Quarter," as it was known, was separate from Anglo society. It operated autonomously as a *colonia* onto itself. At the turn of the century, *Mexicanos* began moving into San Antonio's West Side at a faster pace and in larger numbers. For some, it was an established neighborhood where they could feel comfortable speaking to one another in their native tongue. For others, the racial logics that informed and circumscribed San Antonio's

housing market via racially restrictive housing covenants created pockets of unwelcomed space for some *mexicanos*. And San Antonio was simply a waypoint in their search for work elsewhere for some people. Nevertheless, many set down roots. Since the city offered few planning services, *mexicanos* created homes on an ad hoc basis, hardly better than shacks called *corrals*. Most had dirt floors. Crowded living conditions, poor infrastructure, and cramped living conditions meant the spread of infectious disease became a real problem.<sup>13</sup>

To regulate, control, and manage vice in San Antonio during the Progressive Era, San Antonio's political elite created an informal vice district located on the West Side. While the city had other areas where saloons, gambling dens, and brothels existed, for the most part, the city attempted to contain the vice district on the West Side. For example, because of the proximity to Fort Sam Houston, a large Army installation, saloons existed in the Government Hill neighborhood adjacent to the base. Nevertheless, local cab service provided soldiers transportation to the West Side vice district. While the exact boundaries of the district were in constant flux, and never codified into law, the public understood the boundaries of the district. It provided easy access to the downtown business district for those who wanted to partake in illicit activities after dark. Moreover, the ethnic composition and marginalization of the residents in the West Side meant they had little political power to oppose the concentration of vice into their neighborhood. But some did try.

At the turn of the century, San Antonians debated on where to place the district. One paper suggested that it be enclosed in a "Chinese wall" with a gate guard so that one had to check in and out of the district. This is interesting because it suggest that there was a public

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<sup>13</sup> Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 38-40; Picnot, *An Economic and Industrial Survey*, 6.

debate about the need for a tenderloin district and it highlights the degree to which people wanted it separate from the “respectable” areas of town, but not gone altogether.<sup>14</sup> In another article, an organization called the West Side improvement association “adopted a resolution in favor of a reservation for the tenderloin element.”<sup>15</sup> Apparently concerned citizens created the commission because of the city council’s inability to proactively designate a tenderloin area through city ordinances. It suggests that the public debated the creation of a tenderloin area in San Antonio. Assuming all the members of the West Side improvement association were residents of the West Side, it also suggests that they attempted to act cooperatively in order to advocate for the creation of the district.<sup>16</sup> They did so with other endeavors such a resolutions for better roads.<sup>17</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that this was because, like the report about the wall, they wanted the district contained. At the very least, citizens within the community wanted to give their input on where such districts ought to be. If one existed, they surmised, then the city ought to control it. See Figures 1.1-1.3 below.

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<sup>14</sup> *San Antonio Sunday Light*, August 30, 1903.

<sup>15</sup> *San Antonio Daily Light*, August 20, 1903.

<sup>16</sup> *San Antonio Daily Light*, May 13, 1903. Based off the last names of a signed resolution by members of the Westside Improvement Association, it appears that this was a motley group of people, not ethnically or racially homogeneous.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*





Original located at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin

Figure 1.2 Enlarged Image of Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 32, San Antonio, Texas, 1904.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Volume 1, Sheet 32, Sanborn Map Collection; Jennifer Cain, “For Those Seeking a Good Time while in San



Figure 1.1 is a Sanborn Fire Insurance map of San Antonio, Texas in 1904. Insurance companies used these maps to assess risk in various urban centers throughout the U.S. in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Outlined in a red square is the rough approximation of the West Side *barrio*. On the map, individual sections are color coded and numbered which correspond to numbered sheets that give street-level detail. Figure 1.2 is Sheet 32 and Figure 1.3 is an enlarged image of the upper northwestern quadrant of Sheet 32. Sanborn mapmakers labeled each of the buildings that gave risk assessors integral information. For example, buildings colored in red meant they were comprised of brick whereas yellow indicated a frame building. In Figures 1.2-1.3 some have the “D” designation that stood for “dwelling,” “S” for store, and “Sal” for Saloon. Most of the buildings listed in Figures 1.2-1.3 were individual dwellings. But mapmakers also labeled some as “F.B.” which stood for “Female Boarding House.”<sup>21</sup> In early 20<sup>th</sup> century America, boarding houses for women were relatively common. A landlord subdivided a larger house into many rooms that were more affordable to the occupations. But given the location on the West Side, it seems plausible that some of these boarding houses may have also bawdy houses.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as indicated in San Antonio’s *Blue Book*, a publication that detailed a list of prostitution houses in San Antonio, the vast majority of the residencies listed were along Matamoros, South Concho, and South Santa Rosa streets.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lynne Mueller, “Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps: History, Use, Availability,” *The Primary Source* vol. 26, no. 2 (2004), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Cain, “For Those Seeking a Good Time while in San Antonio, Texas:’ The Restrictions and Permissions of Bawdy Houses from 1889-1941.”

<sup>23</sup> *The Blue Book for Visitors, Tourists and those Seeking a Good Time While in San Antonio, Texas* (1911-1912). San Antonio College, McAllister Collection, 23-27.

The creation of the formal and informal tenderloin districts was not an uncommon practice during the Progressive Era in the United States. Progressive reformers across the country attempted to control rather than eliminate vice.<sup>24</sup> Municipal leaders had a variety of mechanisms at their disposal to funnel vice into specific areas of town: ordinances, controlling where liquor licenses could operate, stricter enforcement of policing outside the designated area, and harsher fines for those caught outside the district.<sup>25</sup> Municipal leaders wanted to push vice away from Anglo residential neighborhoods and suburban communities. In other words, many anti-vice reformers at the turn of the century wanted to “separate residence from commerce and respectable from disreputable.”<sup>26</sup> In San Antonio, vice districts operated in a similar fashion. The West Side was adjacent to the central business district. Visitors could take a short cab drive to the sporting district and engage in its activities, then cross the proverbial tracks back into the “respectable” area of town. This kept most of the city’s illicit activities confined into zones that the city felt they could control and regulate.

The effect of creating and maintaining a vice district within the West Side framed peoples’ understanding of that space. In effect, the city created what one scholar called “reputational segregation.”<sup>27</sup> These zones of vice also mapped easily onto Anglo stereotypes of *mexicanness* at the time. Thus, through the mutually constitutive processes of racial and reputational segregation, the West Side *barrio* became marked, psychologically as well as

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<sup>24</sup> Mara L. Keire, *For Business & Pleasure : Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890-1933* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

physically, as a space of degeneracy, profligacy, and crime. For Anglos, the West Side *barrio* as a site of illicit behavior became synonymous with the people who inhabited that space. In other words, the racialization of the *barrio* began to take form in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1911, a San Antonio police officer published the city's first *Blue Book*. The editor of the book argued that other tour guides for San Antonio spent too much time on San Antonio's historic missions but "failed utterly" to provide "information necessary" for those who wished to "see the city after the shades of night had fallen."<sup>28</sup> To that end, the book, published annually for a low price of twenty-five cents, promised to provide the reader with the names and location of the city's best saloons and disorderly houses. But, the editor warned, "anyone perusing this booklet expecting to be regaled with lewd and obscene reading matter will be sadly disappointed."<sup>29</sup> After a brief introduction where the editor mapped out the lay of the land for the reader—defining the explicit boundaries of the "sporting district," offering recommendations to specific saloons, and which cabs one might call on to get there—the pages are filled with advertisements for specific saloons and their offerings. San Antonio's *Blue Book* hints at a good nightlife in San Antonio, especially for the soldiers stationed in and around the area looking for diversion on their time off. In addition to saloons, the *Blue Book* offered advertisements to a local bowling alley, restaurants, cock pits, and even published a local baseball team's schedule. There were also some advertisements for some less than upright medicinal ads. For example, the editor, Billy Keilman, in addition to promoting his own establishment, offered a surefire cure for a night of sleepless after a night on the town. An ad inquired, "Do things revolve when you

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<sup>28</sup> *The Blue Book for Visitors, Tourists and those Seeking a Good Time While in San Antonio, Texas* (1911-1912). San Antonio College, McAllister Collection, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, preface.

retire? Does your room whirl like a fly-wheel in a power-house?”<sup>30</sup> For someone just visiting the city, the *Blue Book* offered a guide toward navigating the new environment. With “Billy Keilman’s Patent Plugs for Pifflicated People” all one had to do was insert this magical device into the wall somewhere and it would insure a “quiet night’s rest” and “Stop that Merry Go Round!!” Few details were forthcoming, but presumably, one could chat up old Keilman at his establishment, the Beauty Saloon where he encouraged readers to find him.<sup>31</sup>

While advertisements filled the bulk of the booklet, the main attraction for the readers would likely be the “directory of women and houses” towards the back. Filling four full pages, the *Blue Book* listed the names, numbers (if available), and addresses of the city’s prostitutes and/or the name of the brothel for which they worked. Keilman went so far as to separate the women into three categories: A, B, and C. Presumably, “Class A Women” were the most exclusive while “Class C” were of the more “common” variety.<sup>32</sup> Most “Class A” prostitutes were Anglo, though there were some ethnic Mexican, and black prostitutes in one establishment called the Club. Kleinman categorized most prostitutes as “Class C” which catered to all classes of clientele.<sup>33</sup> Some of the women had phone numbers listed, especially those with the more exclusive “Class A” designation. Kleinman listed all the addresses of the women. Kleinman did not elucidate his rationale for categorization, though whiteness likely factored into his decision. One scholar argued that while men sought out prostitutes along the same racial lines, that was not

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 21-26.

<sup>33</sup> Cain, “For Those Seeking a Good Time while in San Antonio, Texas”—the Restrictions and Permissions of Bawdy Houses from 1889-1941.”

always the case.<sup>34</sup> Thus, perhaps, the “Class A” prostitutes were mostly Anglo while the other “classes” prostitutes were a racial and ethnic mixture to meet the diverse demands in a tri-racial city.

While little is known about the women who worked as prostitutes in San Antonio at the turn of the century, city officials thought a lot about how to regulate vice within the city limits. Indeed, San Antonio’s 1899 charter specified that the city council the authority to “suppress and restrain disorderly houses.” Around the turn of the century, San Antonio publicly debated whether to establish a formal “reservation” for vice within the city limits. But, at least until 1917 when cracking down on prostitution became a military necessity, the city seemed to tolerate the operation on an informal basis.<sup>35</sup> This is not meant to suggest that the tenderloin district was not policed. It was and often heavily. Police officers often conducted raids into the district and routinely rounded up women and other “vagrants,” but the city made sure to keep the fines relatively low. This suggests that while middle class reformers likely wanted to see the end of prostitution in San Antonio, politicians understood that vice paid well. As such, the city attempted to regulate vice through license fees, liquor licenses, and, of course, municipal fines. The key was to keep fines reasonable such that they did not cause an undue burden on this population.

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<sup>34</sup> David C. Humphrey, “Prostitution and Public Policy in Austin, Texas, 1870-1915,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* Vol 86 (April 1983), 495.

<sup>35</sup> San Antonio has long been a military city. In the early 20th century when Pancho Villa made his excursions into the United States, the military headquartered some of its operations in San Antonio. As the 20th century progressed, so too did the military presence in San Antonio. By 1917, the military grew increasingly concerned with disorderly behavior and disease affecting its readiness. Because San Antonio understood the importance of having a strong military presence in the city, its leaders began a drive to crackdown and control vice within the city limits. For more information regarding vice controls in San Antonio during the World War I era, see Courtney Q. Shah, “‘Against their Own Weakness’: Policing Sexuality and Women in San Antonio, Texas, during World War I,” *The Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol 19 (September 2010): 458-482.

Importantly, many of the women who worked as prostitutes did so out of their own homes or female boarding houses. This created a financial incentive for real estate investors to support tenderloin districts within urban areas.<sup>36</sup> In Austin's red-light district, for example, women operated out of houses they rented from absentee landlords. Very few women owned their own homes; rather, it seems if they worked out of a domicile, as opposed to a bawdy house, they simply rented the space. Some likely lived outside the district while many likely lived and worked within it. Importantly, Anglo women tended to operate communally within a bawdy house while ethnic Mexican and African American women did not.<sup>37</sup> The racialized nature of sex work in Texas, then, saw ethnic and racial minority women in a double bind. They were often excluded from working within the confines of a house surrounded by other women. This likely meant women of color were in far more precarious and vulnerable positions. The situation was likely similar in San Antonio. It is interesting to note that the confined quarters of San Antonio's red-light district meant that interracial contact was likely a common occurrence—if not in the bawdy houses themselves then certainly on the streets and in the surrounding saloons.

### **1.3 The Criminalization of Vice on the West Side**

The criminalization of brown bodies within the San Antonio West Side red light district, and the attendant public pronouncements of such criminality, reinforced the perception that the West Side was a place of degeneracy. The racialization of place simply mapped onto existing attitudes many Anglos had toward *mexicanos*. For them, it made sense with their worldview

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<sup>36</sup> Keire, *For Business & Pleasure : Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890-1933*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> David C. Humphrey, "Prostitution and Public Policy in Austin, Texas, 1870-1915," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* Vol 86 (April 1983), 488-489.

which located criminality and licentiousness within the body of *mexicanos*. As historian Nayan Shah reminds us in his study on public health in San Francisco, the discursive framing of crime, criminality, and disease continually reproduce knowledge undergirded by science about the communities in which few Anglos tread.<sup>38</sup> The subsequent promotion and publication of criminality in a small section of town of people whose identity was highly racialized in the papers only confirmed those presumptions. Moreover, because interactions with the police and the court within the vice district were highly subjective encounters because of the wide latitude because of police discretion, this meant that the daily interactions between the state and those individuals on the streets was a microcosm of the ways in which race was continually remade through both policing and within the courts.<sup>39</sup>

The first step in the criminalization of vice in San Antonio began with the creation of a broad category with which to enforce municipal laws and ordinances. For cities across the nation, vagrancy laws became the most prominent catch all tool used by municipal authorities to police vice. As one historian notes, vagrancy laws were purposely broad and made for useful tools to enforce anti-vice restrictions.<sup>40</sup> The definition of vagrancy in the city charter read, in part:

all vagrants, idle or disorderly persons, all persons of evil life or ill-fame, all such persons as have no visible means of support, or are likely to become chargeable upon

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<sup>38</sup> Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 17-18.

<sup>39</sup>Here I am borrowing from Nora Krinitsky's excellent dissertation on policing in Chicago, especially the idea that interactions with police on the ground created sites of racial formation, in part, due to the highly subjective nature of discretion in policing practices. Nora Krinitsky, "The Politics of Crime Control: Race, Policing, and Reform in Twentieth-Century Chicago," PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 2017, p. 42.

<sup>40</sup> Keire, *For Business & Pleasure : Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890-1933*, 55.

the city as paupers, or professional or habitual gamblers, all persons who may be found begging or drunk in or about the streets or loitering in and about the bar-rooms or drinking-houses, and who can show no reasonable course of business in this city, all who make no exertions to obtain an honest living, all who have no fixed place of residence, but who are found strolling or wandering about the city, and all who are grossly indecent in language or behavior publicly in the streets, all public prostitutes, or such as lead a notorious or lewd course of life shall be deemed and considered vagrants and offenders against the peace and good order of the city.<sup>41</sup>

Since city leaders wrote the law broadly, police officers and municipal judges had enormous leeway when targeting who to arrest and the adjudication of individual cases. This meant that police officers could choose to enforce the law differentially—perhaps stricter in some areas and laxer in others. Furthermore, the law had little to do with vagrancy as such. In San Antonio, vagrancy included *all who are grossly indecent in language and behavior publicly*. The drafters of San Antonio’s vagrancy law created it to police *behavior* rather than out of concern for public safety. This is crucial. Politicos understood that the elimination of vice in San Antonio all together was unlikely. They needed to control it and to keep illicit behavior they associated with “degenerate” *mexicanos* separate from Anglos. “Reputational segregation” would reinforce other types of “informal” segregation practices that pertained to *mexicanos* who did not neatly fit into codified Jim Crow laws like their African American peers.

Despite their desire to not eliminate vice, police often made raids into the red-light district which lead to dozens of arrests which usually reported in the papers the next morning. The increased attention to, and arrests made within, the red-light district created the perception of a space that was overly disreputable and criminal in behavior. In part, this was purposeful as the city did not want such activities to infiltrate other areas of town. In addition, the local

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<sup>41</sup> San Antonio City Charter, 1899, p. 392. San Antonio Municipal Archives.

newspapers, in their daily publishing of arrests and dispositions of cases in police court, meant that the San Antonio public was acutely aware of where crime happened within the city. And the publication of those arrests helped shaped public opinion on the matter. The arrests and subsequent publication of those arrested is not a neutral act. Its overtly political and has had political consequences for the subjects of interest. Or, in the words of Khalil Muhammad, crime statistics “have always been interpreted, and made meaningful, in a broader political, economic, and social context in which race mattered.”<sup>42</sup>

One need not look hard to find the ways in which the newspapers helped create a racialized discourse on criminality in early twentieth century San Antonio. It was ubiquitous, especially during the first couple of decades after the turn of the century. Newspapers such as the *San Antonio Light and Gazette* and the *San Antonio Daily Light* devoted entire columns to documenting the goings on of the municipal court. While the names often changed, the characterization and racialization of those processed through the justice system remained constant. African American offenders remained quite prominent. Indeed, this is known because reporters almost always described black offenders by “negro” or “negress.” Newspapers simply used ethnic Mexicans’ surname to do the race work for the paper. Rarely did newspapers identify ethnic white identity. In addition to the listing of the offenders’ race/ethnicity, there was often a description of where the offense occurred. If it happened in the vice district, newspapers often reported it as within the “tenderloin” district, across the San Pedro creek, or even the trans-San Pedro corridor. Regardless of how the paper reported the crimes, the attendant consequences of

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<sup>42</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 277.

using racial, ethnic, and geographical markers created physical and psychological space between Anglo readers in the suburbs and the “criminal element” within the city’s vice district.

In one example, San Antonio police conducted a raid on a “west side resort” which resulted in “twenty negroes” arrested on vagrancy charges.<sup>43</sup> In another raid, police arrested thirty-five African Americans in a raid of a “negro resort.” In this raid, the police attempted to curb illegal gambling operations. The police booked all thirty-five individuals on vagrancy charges.<sup>44</sup> While the specific details of the arrests might differ from day to day, one gets a clear impression that African Americans were disproportionately represented in police court usually held on vagrancy charges. San Antonio authorities used vagrancy laws to police illicit behavior in spaces where people of color were over represented. The public shaming of offenders was a daily occurrence in the newspapers between 1900-1920 as vagrancy charges were ubiquitous throughout that period. If one followed the newspaper regularly, this would likely lead to a perception of criminality in certain sections of town, or perhaps in the body of African Americans themselves.

Ethnic Mexican arrests were as widespread as African Americans. In the newspapers, they played out similarly but, usually, the paper did not report ethnicity; they allowed the alleged offenders’ surname do the work. Vagrancy was usually the charge, although “drunkenness” and affray were also common. Interestingly in some cases, papers would ascribe adjectives to ethnic Mexican offenders. For example, the police arrested Ventura Sandoval for assault. The reporter described him as a “fleshy Mexican.” While perhaps not typical, this example highlights how the

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<sup>43</sup> *San Antonio Light*, March 17, 1914.

<sup>44</sup> *San Antonio Light*, March 15, 1914.

paper often created a narrative around the subject in the police court. Being a “fleshy Mexican” conjures the idea of indiscipline, and it easily grafts onto the common stereotype of the “lazy Mexican.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, it assigns an inherent deficit within the body of ethnic Mexicans themselves.

There was often a class component to how newspapers framed the topic of crime and criminality in San Antonio. For example, the *San Antonio Daily Light* reported that Police Captain Kieffer “doubled his force of men” patrolling the tenderloin district when it was reported that a “large number of cotton pickers and other laborers who have been in the country for several weeks” ventured into the city to partake in the sporting district. The reason behind the increased police presence was to “prevent trouble” the headline read because “drinking was the order of things with the cotton pickers.”<sup>46</sup> The paper failed to mention that San Antonio’s sporting district was created explicitly for the purpose of making money off the leisure activities of the very men citizens supposedly needed protection from. In addition, the paper, again, played off the stereotypes of Mexicans as heavy drinkers. But, for the paper and the police who patrolled the district, an increased police presence was necessary because they feared that a group of Mexican laborers would create a problem for those that frequented the tenderloin district. Never mind the fact that San Antonio operated as a regional recruiting hub for agricultural labor in South Texas and the local papers regularly advertised the need for the very same laborers that that politicians feared. Moreover, at a basic level however, vagrancy laws targeted vulnerable populations who were in a period of transition, some people coming to the

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<sup>45</sup> *The San Antonio Sunday Light*, September 30, 1906.

<sup>46</sup> *San Antonio Daily Light*, September 29, 1906.

city to look for work. The widespread use of vagrancy laws as a catch all used to police behavior created a sort of knowledge about ethnic Mexicans, African Americans, and the other denizens who worked and lived in and near the sporting district created, at least in part, to funnel “disreputable” behavior into one area of town; keeping it out of the suburban areas.<sup>47</sup> In other words, when placed in context with the ubiquity that ethnic Mexicans appeared as criminals in the paper, one can see how newspapers created a sort of discursive knowledge about *mexicanos*, and about the spaces and places they inhabited.

Perhaps the most common form of criminalization through vagrancy laws applied to how the police, courts, and newspapers treated the women who worked inside the tenderloin district. A typical raid from police might end with dozens of women arrested. If the women arrested were black, racial descriptors of “negress” would follow. For example, the police picked up Bessie Sookin and Mathilda Miller in the same raid. Municipal Court Judge Buckley assessed both women a ten-dollar fine. The *San Antonio Light and Gazette* made sure to refer to both women as “negress.”<sup>48</sup> Like African American men, this seemed light a common way to differentiate those who plied their trade within the tenderloin district from “respectable” citizens. Likewise, ethnic Mexicans did not usually merit an ethnic identifier other than their surname. But, like the men, the papers often used adjectives when describing *mexicana* prostitutes to further give rise to this notion of difference. For example, police arrested Carolina Garcia for using “abusive language” towards a police officer. The paper felt to the need to report that “she is a regular

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<sup>47</sup> Here I am using the term “suburban” loosely to define a space away from the urban core which began to develop in San Antonio after the turn of the century. San Antonio had a streetcar system that enabled the development of newer territories on the suburban fringe. See, Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), ch. 7.

<sup>48</sup> *San Antonio Light and Gazette*, April 25, 1910.

visitor to the corporation court and each time gets off with a light fine.”<sup>49</sup> This type of editorialization did not usually occur for other offenders. The paper felt that Garcia’s offenses merited harsher fines perhaps because she was, at least implied in the article, a prostitute who police arrested frequently. The narrative surrounding Garcia, however, leaves the impression that her failure was inherent in her body—as if she had been given several chances, but her failing was too great. Likewise, the same paper described Marcelina Mendez as “a portly Mexican woman with a voice like a man and whose haunts are on the west side in the tenderloin” who police arrested on a vagrancy charge. For the paper, Mendez was not a respectable lady. She “haunted” the West Side tenderloin area. Barely a “lady” because she did not comport to standard definitions of beauty: she was “portly” and had a “manly” voice.<sup>50</sup> In other words, her actions were expected because a respectable woman would not put herself in a such a position. The narrative the paper created around Mendez was one who operated on the margins of society—someone set apart. In short, she was just the type of woman one would find in San Antonio’s sporting district.

In another raid, Captain Kieffer and other “plain clothes” detectives arrested seventeen women: six *mexicanas*, five Anglos, and six black women on vagrancy charges “on the West Side in the tenderloin district.” They were picked up on the streets, in “wine rooms,” and saloons to fulfill the desire of the police to “suppress vice” in the tenderloin district. They all plead guilty and the court assessed a typical five-dollar charge per individual. Indeed, the process had become so routine for these women that they each had their fine readily available to pay the court. One

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<sup>49</sup> *San Antonio Daily Light*, September 28, 1906.

<sup>50</sup> *San Antonio Sunday Light*, September 30, 1906.

woman drew the ire of Judge Buckley because she simply handed over her fine and tried to walk out of the courtroom before her charge the Court could read her charge. Judge Buckley stopped her and said, “You just wait a minute. I have not fined you as yet.” The woman turned around and took a deep breath, rather than respond to the Judge, apparently not wanting to illicit a heftier fine. When Buckley let her go with the standard fine, she left the court “smiling.”<sup>51</sup> This interaction is telling. It suggests that that the city had increased pressure periodically into the sporting district. Reading through the reporting on raids in the San Antonio vice district, one comes away with the feeling that these periods of increased police presence likely came from political pressure rather than a desire from the police to increase activity within the tenderloin district or an uptick in increased “immoral” activity itself.<sup>52</sup>

The police used various tactics, including undercover officers, to catch women working both indoors and on the streets. There seemed to be an informal way to ply one’s trade within the district and if one operated outside those boundaries, arrest was likelier. For instance, in another raid, “a score of damsels, denizens of Santa Rosa avenue” appeared before Judge Buckley on vagrancy charges. Apparently, police arrested the women because they “flagrantly violated” police regulations that required prostitutes to “screen themselves from the public gaze.”<sup>53</sup> Buckley fined each five dollars but warned that a heftier fine would be imposed if any of the women showed up in court again. This interaction is particularly telling because it illustrates how the city understood and policed vice, especially prostitution: the state tolerated the act of selling

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<sup>51</sup> *San Antonio Daily Light*, November 3, 1906.

<sup>52</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West*, 62. Here Shah is quoting from Eric Monkonn, *Police in Urban America*.

<sup>53</sup> *San Antonio Light and Gazette*, July 7, 1910.

one's body for money so long as it was not obvious and in public view. Police and the courts policed perception in as much as they policed vice.

While women prostitutes could expect to be harassed, arrested, and fined by the police should they openly ply their trade in San Antonio, they understood that informal rules governed the interactions between themselves and the state—in the form of the police and the courts. The fines that Judge Buckley's police court levied on those brought up on vagrancy charges were usually moderate and affordable as the interaction above illustrated. Sometimes, however, the policing of vice broke those informal rules and women prostitutes resisted. For example, in another raid, police arrested between 30 and 40 women on vagrancy charges. Instead of the customary five dollar fine, however, the courted were fined \$17.50 each—a substantial sum in 1909. For some of the women, this fine seemed, a high price to pay and they decided to go to jail rather than pay the fine. When asked of their treatment in the jail, one woman said, "Oh, we're well cared for . . . We have had fruit and flowers and lots of good things sent to us." People even offered to pay their fines for them, but they declined saying "Not for us though, we're going to stick it out." Indeed, according to the report, the women seemed to enjoy their time in jail as they played cards and got into a bit of trouble for being too loud. "We have a pretty good time, but I guess we get a little noisy at times," one woman said. "[Sheriff] Lindsey came up this morning and scolded us and told us we were in jail and would have to be quiet and behave."

Their modest protest worked because the police released some without assessing a fine. Indeed, the paper reported that Police Captain Trainer declared, "hereafter if officials want to bring on raids of the tenderloin, they may, but he will take no part other than to what papers are

placed in his hands as required by law.”<sup>54</sup> Such dissension suggests a breakdown between the city politicians who wanted to police the district and the realities on the ground. The women understood that the city did not have the resources to continually jail, house, and feed large numbers of women for extended periods of time. Moreover, it suggests that the council broke an implicit contract by increasing the fines on these women beyond what was either normal or what they could realistically afford to pay. Perhaps both. In any event, this incident suggests a sort of negotiated contract between both the women who plied their wares on the streets of San Antonio and the police they interacted with on a regular basis. Both groups understood policing morality could not extinguish prostitution. Both sides understood that the women had to earn enough to make a living while the city could implement a vice tax up to a certain point, otherwise they would revolt. And, at least in this instance, some of the police preferred to act practically when it came to policing the vice district. Captain Trainer concluded, by simply serving a citation rather than arrest, “I could save each one of the women \$4 or \$5.”<sup>55</sup> All parties involved, however, understood that eliminating vice, as a practical matter, was impossible.

Despite these small acts of resistance, the stigma attached to those who worked, played, and especially lived in and around San Antonio’s tenderloin district remained long after the saloons and “female boarding houses” which populated the area closed. The creation and funneling of the tenderloin district in to San Antonio’s West Side *barrio* was a strategic move made by San Antonio politicians to control vice and direct it away from the Anglo suburbs. The criminalization of bodies within the district and the subsequent publication of the arrests helped

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<sup>54</sup> *San Antonio Light*, January 12, 1909.

<sup>55</sup> *San Antonio Light*, January 12, 1909.

map race and crime onto place. However, it was perhaps the conflation of disease with place and space that did more work to shape the discourse surrounding the West Side ethnic Mexican *barrio* than any other policy.

#### 1.4 Soldiers and Vice

The criminalization of bodies and the racialization of space did much work in creating the discursive *barrio* as a site of deficit. However, it was the “scientific knowledge” created through public discussions on cleanliness, health, and disease that ultimately framed popular understanding of the ethnic Mexican West Side.<sup>56</sup> Historians have shown the degree to which the tentacles of the administrative state reached into local communities and helped to define who was, and was not, “fit to be citizens.” Across the nation during the first half of the twentieth century, public debates on public health “menaces” often revealed class bias mapped onto assumed racialized discourses of normal and abnormal behavior. When mapped onto space, this supposed scientific “knowledge” often had the attendant effect of stigmatizing entire populations of people rather than rooting out the underlying structural problems created by lack of investment in certain communities, public sanitation, and proper urban planning.<sup>57</sup> San Antonio was no different in this regard. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, debates surrounding vice and venereal disease in the tenderloin district, public health surveys that created scientific knowledge of the ethnic Mexican West Side, and the curtailment of food sales in public plazas in

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<sup>56</sup> Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West*, 18. Here I borrow Shah’s framework of scientific knowledge to explain how public discourses about ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio—newspaper accounts and sociological studies—helped affirm contemporary understandings of the Mexican race in the minds of Anglos. In his discussion of San Francisco, scientific studies created a similar “knowledge” about the Chinese race and Chinatown.

<sup>57</sup> Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Also, see for example: Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

San Antonio for health concerns worked in tandem to racialize the West Side *barrio* and its denizens.

The city had a love and hate relationship with San Antonio's tenderloin district on the West Side. City leaders understood that completely outlawing vice in the city would not work, so their goal at the turn of the century was to confine and contain illicit behavior on the West Side. All parties understood that there was profit to be made in the tenderloin district so long as informal norms and customs were strictly enforced. The citizenry seemed to put up with the notion of a tenderloin district. The ethnic Mexican middle class neighborhood of Prospect Hill, close to the tenderloin district, but not a part of it, decided to petition the city to simply reroute certain streetcar lines so that they did not have to interact with denizens of the tenderloin district and those who chose to frequent the area.<sup>58</sup> R. G. Callaghan president of the Prospect Hill Improvement club represented the interests of the Prospect Hill neighborhood as he petitioned the city council to reroute the "I. & G. N. car line out of West Houston street" so that it would not "traverse the tenderloin district" as was its current operation.<sup>59</sup> So long as the tenderloin district was a world apart, middle class Anglos, and middle class ethnic Mexicans for that matter, seemed to care little for the activities that happened within the district. That changed, however, when the interests of the city, the burgeoning military establishment, and the tenderloin district clashed.

The military has long had a military presence in San Antonio; indeed, by 1930, the military became the primary economic driver in San Antonio through its four military

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<sup>58</sup> Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 84.

<sup>59</sup> *San Antonio Light*, October 11, 1912.

installations: Kelly, Fort Sam Houston, Brooks, and Randolph.<sup>60</sup> But, by 1917, San Antonio's relationship with the United States government was still being established. San Antonio's red-light district put that relationship in question with the United States' entrance into World War I. The question of military necessity and soldier health became of paramount national security importance. In May 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act which authorized the president to create a national army through conscription. In the act, Congress authorized the Secretary of War "to do everything by him deemed necessary to suppress and prevent the keeping or setting up of houses of ill fame, brothels, or bawdy houses within such distance as he may deem needful of any military camp, station, fort, post, cantonment, training, or mobilization place."<sup>61</sup> In other words, so concerned for military readiness was Congress, that it instructed the Secretary of War to create zones free of vice to ensure that young, impressionable soldiers were not "corrupted" by such illicit activities. In pursuit of this directive, Secretary of War Newton Diehl Baker sent a letter to the governors requesting their assistance in this regard. In the letter he argued that it was their shared responsibility to keep the morality of young, impressionable servicemen intact. Secretary of War Baker said, "We cannot allow these young men, most of whom will have been drafted to service, to be surrounded by a vicious and demoralizing environment, nor can we leave anything undone which will protect them from unhealthy influences and crude forms of temptation." He went on to argue that they had a shared moral responsibility to the "families and communities" of the young men but that it was a "military necessity" to enforce such laws to "promote the health and conserve the vitality of the men in the

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<sup>60</sup> Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 29.

<sup>61</sup>"An Act to Authorize the President to Increase Temporarily the Military Establishment of the United States," H.R. 3545, Public, No 12, May 18, 1917, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/65th-congress/session-1/c65s1ch15.pdf?loclr=blogloc-ww1>. Also known as the Selective Service Act (1917).

training camps.” Finally, Baker warned, “we expect the cooperation and support of the local communities” otherwise he would recommend that such camps be relocated to more amenable communities.<sup>62</sup> This spurred action in both the Texas legislature and at the local level.<sup>63</sup>

San Antonio’s city council acted. At a city council meeting on November 21, 1917, they created a vice commission which drafted a report based on their research into the vice district, police department, and the cooperation between military and civilian authorities. The commission report’s author Chester H. Terrell, a well-known lawyer and former state legislature, served as secretary. The commission found a general apathy by the San Antonio police department towards the enforcement of closing the gambling and prostitution houses within the city limits. Terrell found the department “derelict in its duty” and “inefficient and disorganized.” Moreover, the vice commission found fault in Chief of Police Fred Lancaster’s leadership in that while he directed his officers to enforce the anti-gambling and anti-prostitution laws in June 1917, the lack of follow-up meant the gambling houses reopened after a short time and that prostitutes continued to ply their trade after their arrest.<sup>64</sup> Among its recommendations, the commission argued that Chief Lancaster be suspended and brought up on charges pending a hearing before the Commissioners in January 1918.

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<sup>62</sup> Secretary of War Newton Diehl Baker to State Governors, “Letter addressed by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker to the Governors of all the States and the Chairman of the State Councils of Defense, May 26, 1917,” quoted in William F. Snow, “Social Hygiene and the War,” *Journal of Social Hygiene*, vol 3 (July 1917). Baker’s letter is reproduced in full within the article.

<sup>63</sup> David C. Humphrey, “Prostitution in Texas: From the 1830s to the 1960s,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 33. no.1 (1995), p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> San Antonio Vice Committee to Mayor Bell, Vice Commission Report, as published in the Commissioners Meeting Minutes, December 27, 1917. San Antonio Municipal Archives.

While the focus of the vice commission's ire was on Chief Lancaster and the ineffective police department, it also found that part of the larger problem with soldiers and the vice district was the fault of individual women themselves. The report rarely found fault within the soldiers themselves. The sole focus of the war department's memo and the subsequent ordinances created by the city was to impel prostitutes, gambling house owners, and saloon operators to contribute to the civic need and refrain from bringing disrepute among the soldiers. Indeed, one of the biggest problems that the anti-vice reformers found with respect to soldiers was that an entrepreneurial class continued to deliver liquor and beer to the soldiers despite regulations and enforcement by the police. They found that "most of the bootlegging is done by women" and that in addition to the federal charges they faced, such women should face both state and local charges. This is particularly revealing because, like the letter from Secretary of War Baker to the states, virtue was assumed on the part of soldiers while any disrepute brought upon them was the fault of woman, and those who operated saloons and gambling houses. In other words, the state placed the blame for fault for the soldiers' fall, and by extension, the success or failure of the war effort on the shoulders of women's virtue. In this vein, then, the vice committee also recommended that the city cancel all future public dances. The commission implied that the virtuousness of "nice girls" was at stake because they could not investigate the "character of the soldiers" who also frequented public dances.<sup>65</sup> If the role of men, conscripted into the army, was to fight and perhaps die for the nation, the civic responsibility of the woman, then, was to remain virtuous in the face of war. To do otherwise was anathema to both gendered assumptions of sex and domesticity as well as a flagrant disregard for the war effort itself. The state policed sex and

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<sup>65</sup> San Antonio Vice Committee to Mayor Bell, Vice Commission Report, as published in the Commissioners Meeting Minutes, December 27, 1917. San Antonio Municipal Archives.

punished women of “ill repute” in both federal and state as well. In other words, the state placed a high price for deviance on women when it came to issues of national security, preparedness, and military necessity.

As the nation moved onto a war-footing, the state impelled local communities to protect its soldiers for the good of the nation, and the war effort. To acquiesce to the War Department’s demands, localities across the nation increased enforcement in vice districts. In Texas, the increased enforcement had little meaningful effect except in the immediate aftermath. After the police left the district, business tended to resume operations despite claims from the American Social Hygiene Association which argued “San Antonio is today about as free from commercialized prostitution, gambling, and the selling of liquors to soldiers as any city of its size in the country.”<sup>66</sup> Prostitution in San Antonio decreased during the war years but was never eliminated. Moreover, prostitution changed form during this period whereby prostitutes began to operate out of hotels as opposed to bawdy houses.<sup>67</sup> It became less visible but remained a part of San Antonio culture and society. Nevertheless, the stigmatization and association with the West Side of San Antonio as a space of illicit activity remained in the imagination of Anglos in the city.

### **1.5 Tuberculosis and the *Barrio***

While public health scares occurred in San Antonio during the early interwar period, the acute nature of the tuberculosis panic during the Depression-era when an influx of people

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<sup>66</sup> Bascom Johnson, “What Some Communities of the West and Southwest Have Done for the Protection of Morals and Health of Soldiers and Sailors,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 3, no. 4 (October 1917), 490-491.

<sup>67</sup> David C. Humphrey, “Prostitution in Texas: From the 1830s to the 1960s,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 33, no.1 (1995), p. 31-32.

migrated to the city caused additional concern for public officials. The public discourse surrounding health and disease in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also inextricably linked to the process of racializing the West Side *barrio*. San Antonio public health officials cast the West Side as a disease ridden “slum” that officials had to deal with otherwise the contamination would spread to other areas of town. They grafted disease onto race and mapped that onto space. The public health emergency that arose out of the tuberculosis crisis in the 1930s, and the state’s response to it, illustrates the nexus of public health discourses, race, and space. Moreover, sociological studies conducted on behalf of the city helped to produce and legitimize “scientific knowledge” about the West Side and its residents. Combined, the increase concern over public health scares and scientific knowledge helped cement in the public imagination the West Side as a site of deficit.

In 1939, San Antonio mayor Maurey Maverick requested that the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) conduct a tuberculosis and venereal disease study in San Antonio to take stock of the epidemic and how well the city’s services had been dealing with the problem. To anyone who lived in San Antonio, tuberculosis would likely have been a concern people thought about in a vague sense when getting on the street car or in a public place. However, it was likely not a disease that people constantly fretted about daily, especially middle-class Anglos who lived apart from the crowded confines of the *barrio*. For folks on the West Side, tuberculosis was likely not a foreign threat—it was very much real to ethnic Mexicans on the West Side because it had ravaged their community for years. Before the USPHS survey, most citizens and the city cared little about the disease if public expenditures are a measure of care. One report indicated that the city spent \$6,000 annually on tuberculosis care for the city versus \$44,000 on the campaign

against syphilis.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps this was to be expected because of the concern that city leaders expressed on protecting military personnel stationed around San Antonio; however, it is also a striking indication on the degree to which city politicians cared about the disease that infected the West Side *barrio*. It is perhaps not coincidental that the higher degree of tuberculosis rates in the ethnic Mexican community would not generate public outrage or concern precisely because of how the disease, and ethnic Mexicans in particular, were racialized. Among the study's conclusions was that part of San Antonio's difficulties in tackling the tuberculosis problem was that care was compartmentalized through various organizations with little coordination and that the city and county health departments were so disjointed and disorganized that it was "impossible to develop a clear picture of the entire program."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, that organizations such as the Bexar County Tuberculosis Association, which held regular drives for tuberculosis funding, was simply unable to adequately address the needs of an entire city—private donations for a public health epidemic were insufficient. San Antonio's inability to adequately address its tuberculosis problem effectively meant that it had some of the highest death rates in the nation. For example, in 1937, the death rate for tuberculosis in San Antonio was 148.5 per 100,000 versus 78 and 77 in Dallas and Houston respectively for the year 1936.<sup>70</sup> See Table 1-1. Generally, the overcrowded conditions in the *barrio* lent itself to higher concentrations of

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<sup>68</sup> *San Antonio Express*, January 10, 1940.

<sup>69</sup> W.P. Dearing and J.R. Heller, Jr., "Public Health Survey of San Antonio, Texas with Particular Regard to Tuberculosis and Venereal Disease Control," 1939, p 8, tuberculosis section. Box 102, Folder 05. American Social Health (Hygiene) Association Records, 1905-1990, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries. Hereafter cited ASHA Records.

<sup>70</sup> W.P. Dearing and J.R. Heller, Jr., "Public Health Survey of San Antonio, Texas with Particular Regard to Tuberculosis and Venereal Disease Control," 1939, p 1, tuberculosis section, ASHA Records.

tuberculosis cases compared to the rest of the city.

**Death Rates for Latin Americans (including non-residents)**

Age	Population	Number of Deaths	Death Rate per 100,000
Under 5	10,956	17	155.2
5-9	11,687	5	42.8
10-19	17,376	43.7	251.5
20-29	15,876	87.3	549.9
30-39 E	10,338	41.3	399.5
40-49	7,946	29.7	373.8
50 or over	8,648	32.3	373.5

*Table 1.1: Death Rates for Latin Americans (including non-residents).<sup>71</sup>*

Table 1.1. shows that tuberculosis ravaged every demographic area of the ethnic Mexican community. While tuberculosis affected the African American and Anglo communities as well, their ability to either find treatment or resist its pernicious and deadly effects was higher than that of the ethnic Mexican community. It was a real problem in the ethnic Mexican community; many people died from tuberculosis each year. San Antonio’s death rate was twice the national average

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

in 1935 and San Antonio did not have the capacity to provide the type of care that tubercular individuals needed.<sup>72</sup> The Robert B. Green hospital provided care for the indigent; however, it lacked the resources necessary to fully handle the widespread need in San Antonio. Moreover, prior to the publicity generated by the USPHS survey in 1939, concern for tuberculosis was limited as indicated in the sporadic newspaper articles referencing tuberculosis during the interwar years. The exception, however, was that San Antonio's *La Prensa* regularly talked about tuberculosis in its pages. Groups such as *Orden Caballeros de America* (Order Knights of America), a civic organization founded in San Antonio held charitable benefits whose proceeds would be donated to various charities, including the Bexar County Tuberculosis Association.<sup>73</sup> But *La Prensa* also covered what was happening with tuberculosis in other communities across Texas. For example, in 1936 Dr. Elva A. Wright, president of the Texas came to San Antonio to attend conferences on tuberculosis with members of the Bexar County Anti-Tuberculosis Association and the Alonso Perales from the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).<sup>74</sup> From 1939, onward, however, the difference in publicity in the English language press was night and day.

As part of a national campaign to combat and educate the population about tuberculosis, the National Tuberculosis Association contracted a production company called Springer Pictures to create targeted instructional videos on tuberculosis for various ethnic and racial communities between August 1940 and July 1941. Edgar Ulmer directed these short newsreel type films

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<sup>72</sup> *Washington Tribune*, November 15, 1935.

<sup>73</sup> *La Prensa*, January 19, 1936.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, March 29, 1936.

which included *My People Live* (1938) targeting African Americans, *A Cloud in the Sky* (1939) which focused on *mexicanos*, and *Another to Conquer* (1941) for Native Americans.<sup>75</sup> *A Cloud in the Sky* was filmed in San Antonio, Texas. The apparent goal of the film is to reach out into these ethnic and racial communities, and in the case of *A Cloud in the Sky*, dig past the supposed “veil of superstition” that hampered *mexicano* society because of the Catholic Church. The church and science were not anathema but worked together for the betterment of *mexicano* society.<sup>76</sup>

The film follows Consuelo as she navigates the unfamiliar world of “modern medicine.” Her mother contracted a cough and eventually died of tuberculosis because, as her father lamented to a friend, “We don’t know enough of this world, Pedro! If only I would [have] take[n] Consuelo’s mother to a doctor. But we are afraid of doctors!” Unfortunately, Consuelo and her father suspect she too has tuberculosis. He urges her to see a doctor, but she initially refuses. Only her beloved priest can convince her that she ought to see a doctor. Concerned, she approaches the Father after she has knelt in prayer over her illness. She says, “Father, I am afraid. My mother was taken from me. Now I am ill. I cough. I’m tired all the time. I have the same signs she had. Help me, Father, help me.” The priest assures her that he will help her but she must believe not only in her faith in God but in science. “I will give you the blessings of the church and all the consolations of religion, but you must take my advice,” the priest implores Consuelo. “You must go to the doctor at once. He can help you. You must not use patent medicines; you must not use home remedies. . . . [God] has given us intelligence. He has also

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<sup>75</sup> Noah William Isenberg, *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 111.

<sup>76</sup> Rosario de la Vega, R.C. Ortega, F.L. Tafolla, Frederick J. Mann, R. Treviño, Jr., *A Cloud in the Sky*, directed by Edgar G. Ulmer (New York: The National Tuberculosis Association, 1940), <http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/8800947A>.

given us science and doctors who spend their lives curing and helping those who are ill and who suffer. God wants us to use the gifts that he has given us from heaven. You must go to a doctor, Conseulo.”<sup>77</sup>

The film replicated variations of this scene throughout its entirety. The film depicts *mexicanos* as backward and hapless. They are stuck in their old ways but happy, except for the disease that is eating through their community. Anglos in the film are all in positions of authority—the priest, doctor, and nurse—who are there to bestow both a cure, but more importantly, knowledge onto the *mexicanos* who are little more than children, hampered by their superstitious religious beliefs. The film is both a didactic film about tuberculosis: its symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment, and an Americanization project. Its role, embodied in the Anglo characters, are there to bring enlightenment to the Old World. The film opens with *mexicanos* singing and dancing in old world Spanish regalia; they cannot be Americans, they are foreign.<sup>78</sup>

Only Anglo medicine and knowledge could relieve *mexicanos* of their backwardness that prevented them from modernity. When Consuelo’s father is discussing her condition with the doctor, he is worried about the cost of sending Consuelo to a sanitarium. The doctor brushes off his concern and patronizingly says, “all people in an enlightened community know tuberculosis is not only a personal misfortune, but that it threatens every household. Tuberculosis knows no line of race, religion, or social status so people gladly support a sanitarium so that their children are not infected.” Here the doctor positions Consuelo’s father outside of the community—as a threat to it. Only “enlightened” people understood that tubercular patients had to be separated to

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

prevent the spread of the disease. This implies that if only *mexicanos* knew better that such diseases would not spread. Eventually, Consuelo goes to the sanitarium for a year and recovers fully. On her journey to recovery she is helped by her beau, who at one point, dressed as a mariachi, serenaded her beneath her hospital window. He sang the Mexican love song “*Cielito Lindo*.” Eventually a healthy Consuelo reunites with her family and gets married.

This film perfectly encapsulates how Anglos understood disease and race in San Antonio at the time. The doctor in the film suggests that the community would happily contribute to the creation of a sanitarium in which tubular patients could recover. However, no clinic existed on the West Side to diagnose and treat tubular patients; instead, nurses working for the health department made home visits. Moreover, the city’s clinic run out of the city hospital and the clinic at Robert B. Green hospital lacked the capacity to handle the tuberculosis outbreak in the San Antonio ethnic community which the USPHS investigators found high and inaccurately reported.<sup>79</sup> Before 1940, very little public funding went specifically to tuberculosis prevention and treatment despite the continuous high death rates in the city. In short, neither the city nor the county devoted much fiscal support in the treatment and prevention of tuberculosis in San Antonio prior to World War II. The National Tuberculosis Association created *A Cloud in the Sky* as an educational tool to promote greater understanding of the disease within the ethnic Mexican community; however, it reflected contemporary attitudes of medical professionals based on racist stereotypes of “diseased” and “dirty” Mexicans. The USPHS survey suggested that biological determinism played as much a role as cramped living conditions in the tuberculosis epidemic in San Antonio. The report blamed the *mexicanos* for the tuberculosis outbreak and chided Anglos

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<sup>79</sup> W.P. Dearing and J.R. Heller, Jr., “Public Health Survey of San Antonio, Texas with Particular Regard to Tuberculosis and Venereal Disease Control,” 1939, pp 8-14, tuberculosis section. Box 102, Folder 05. ASHA Records.

for not taking the problem seriously. It found that some of the highest death rates for Anglos was located in areas where there were higher concentrations of ethnic Mexicans. The report stated, “of particular interest to those who complacency state that the Latin American problem bears no immediate relationship to the tuberculosis situation among Anglo Americans, is the fact that Wards 1, 2 and 3, with the highest percentage of Latin American population, show the highest death rates among Anglo Americans.” This is of particular interest because it does at least three things, it reinforces the stereotype that *mexicanos* are “dirty” and were to blame for the disease, it legitimized the need to segregate the ethnic Mexican population in San Antonio, and it stoked racialized fears within the Anglo community about *mexicanos* in their midst. The report concluded that “the above facts indicate that the Latin American tuberculosis problem cannot be isolated, but it is of immediate concern of every man, woman, and child in the city.”<sup>80</sup>

Racialized understandings of *mexicanness* informed “scientific knowledge” within the medical community. The report argued that Mexicans were more susceptible to tuberculosis because of their “undoubted racial susceptibility from their Indian ancestry.”<sup>81</sup> The condemnation of ethnic Mexicans as incubators of disease by the state is important. As Nyan Shah has shown in his study of San Francisco Chinatown, public health officials, acting on the authority of the state, were not neutral actors. They helped create a “scientific knowledge” of Chinatown that “produced explanations that tenaciously connected the Chinese race to place, behavior, and

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.,4.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

cultural differences and framed the endurance of the Chinatown ghetto as a living repository of the strange, peculiar, and unassimilable in San Francisco.”<sup>82</sup>

Likewise, the public health discourses surrounding tuberculosis in San Antonio helped solidify racialized understandings of the ethnic Mexican community. While not solely responsible for racializing the San Antonio *barrio*, public health discussions, especially from the state, helped cast *mexicanos* as fundamentally different from Anglos in their capacity to accept the mantle of citizenship in the United States. The attendant effects of the public discourse surrounding the tuberculosis crisis in 1930s San Antonio helped solidify notions of difference within the *mexicano* community in San Antonio and helped define the contours of the discursive *barrio* on the city’s West Side. But *mexicanos* were never passive agents in this regard. They contested the public image of them by making their neighborhood a home. The next chapter will detail how *mexicanos* turned the *barrio* into their home.

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<sup>82</sup> Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 20.

## Chapter 2 “People are Power”: Creating Community on the West Side

When asked to describe the *barrio* that she grew up in during the Depression era, Emma Tenayuca, the firebrand labor organizer who led the largest strike in San Antonio’s history, remembered its integrated nature most clearly. Tenayuca recalled she grew up near African American families, German families, and Italian families. Above all she recalled the West Side had “muy *mexicanos*.” Tenayuca continued, “But it was just that type of neighborhood, and what really kept us together was the church – St. Agnes.”<sup>1</sup> At St. Agnes Catholic Church, Tenayuca had her First Communion and she attended catechism classes during the summer. For a young *mexicana* growing up on the West Side, that was her second home. Future state senator Joe Bernal said something similar when asked to identify his world growing up. But he called Our Lady of Guadalupe Church his second home, just over a mile from St. Agnes. The church was an important part of his life and mother demanded he and his siblings attend. “She was very strict with the calendar. . . . Holy Week was a bad week when we were growing up. She wouldn’t let us play. She wouldn’t let us go outside,” Bernal recalled.<sup>2</sup>

The West Side that Tenayuca and Bernal recalled was a far cry from the dangerous place that the papers described. For them, both of a similar age, the West Side was home. There was

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Emma Tenayuca, interviewed by Jerry Poyo, February 1987. University of Texas at San Antonio: Institute of Texan Cultures: Oral History Collection, UA 15.01.12, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Joe Bernal, interviewed by Vinicio Sintia and Stephen Arionus, June 2016. The Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/>. Hereinafter cited as CRBB Interview.

crime but there was also community. They both went to Catholic services and both went to local schools. Tenayuca loved going to the local plazas and listening to people talk about news from around the world while eating ice cream. Bernal liked to fish in the two creeks, the Alazan and Apache, that flowed through the West Side near his home. Both Tenayuca and Bernal would serve their community in separate ways. Bernal would go on to become a state senator in the 1970s while Tenayuca would organize workers on the West Side in the 1938. Their community defined them and gave them strength to a certain degree. Part of the reason that their neighborhood left such an indelible imprint on their lives was because of the cultural, social, and economic institutions created within the *barrio* in the absence of a social welfare state. This meant that West Side residents often looked to one another for support in times of need.

Community building became important during periods of economic distress when municipalities made decisions about how to distribute a finite set of resources for an expanding population. This was especially significant during the Great Depression when municipal governments across the United States looked to trim their welfare rolls using exclusionary measures. The state targeted *mexicanos*, in particular, during this period in what they called “repatriation” drives in which the state coerced both Americans of Mexican descent and Mexican nationals to “voluntarily” immigrate back to Mexico irrespective if they had ever set foot in that country.<sup>3</sup> During these drives, one’s citizenship status mattered little, as the perception of foreignness inscribed in one’s skin color or ethnic cultural heritage was proof enough given the heightened state of nativism and racial animosity that pervaded this period. In 1924, the United

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<sup>3</sup> Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 51.

States created the Border Patrol which began to actively police the border and *mexicano* bodies.<sup>4</sup> As Mai Ngai has argued, the criminalization of unauthorized border entry into the United States, with a judicial and administrative mechanism to enforce immigration laws, meant that the rhetoric and treatment of immigrants changed during the 1920s and beyond.<sup>5</sup> The United States shift in immigration policy helped construct categories of deserving and undeserving immigrants, prioritizing Western European to the detriment of other immigrant populations, especially non-white populations.

During the Great Depression, when economic anxiety, buttressed by white supremacy and nativism, transformed Latinos/as into “burdens on the state,” community institutions and organizations stepped in to fill the void which helped to solidify notions of fraternity and community. In San Antonio, organizations such as the newly created League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the Association of Independent Voters, and various social service organizations worked to ensure that the municipal government did not forget about its obligations to the residents of the West Side. Moreover, regular citizens co-opted public space to leverage their ability to create community and, in some instances, to create union consciousness among disfranchised ethnic Mexican wage laborers. In sum, the West Side had never been the space of degeneracy that many San Antonians on the outside envisioned. It was a vibrant community of thinkers, leaders, and everyday residents living their lives in dignity. Each worked, in their own way, to build the best life and community they could for themselves and their families. During a period of heightened scrutiny on foreign born populations—both real and

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kelly Lytle-Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 57.

imagined—the necessity for a space that one could grow, learn, and love mattered a great deal. Some of the lessons of community garnered in these early years translated into broader community knowledge passed on as a new generation attempted to affect meaningful change in their community.

## **2.1 The State and the “Mexican Problem”**

In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act which overhauled U.S. immigration laws. The act added stricter quotas for countries outside of northern and western Europe. In addition to restricting immigration from other countries, the 1920s also engendered a new way of thinking about immigration into the United States based, at least in part, on ideas of white supremacy, nativism, and eugenics. Restrictionists feared increased immigration would lead to miscegenation which would eventually lead to the deterioration of the “character” of the national heritage which derived from northwestern European stock. This type of racist thinking permeated the legislative process and informed policy-making. For example, in 1920, the immigration and naturalization committee in Congress held hearings concerning the potential need to suspend immigration into the United States. In April, prominent eugenicist Harry H. Laughlin gave testimony on the “biological aspects of immigration” which held many committee members in rapt attention. Laughlin argued that the current immigration system was too lax in its considerations for entry. Based on supposed scientific and eugenic evidence, he concluded that immigration officials must take the “eugenical element” into consideration when deciding to admit immigrants into the country. By “eugenical element” he meant that a person’s familial background must be thoroughly investigated to ensure the “right” kind of person was seeking

admittance into the United States and he also argued for a national immigration registry that all immigrants had to comply with to monitor their process of Americanization.<sup>6</sup>

It was from this milieu that the Johnson-Reed Act was envisioned and, in 1924, enacted. Prior to 1924, the United States had allowed a three percent quota for foreign-born immigrant populations. For restrictionists, concerned about the purity of the Anglo race, the influx of immigrants from southern Europe was problematic. With the help of Congress, they devised a scheme to establish stricter limitations on immigration by using the 1890 census as a baseline, while also decreasing the intake population from 3% to 2%. In effect, this new quota system drastically cut immigration from eastern and southern Europe. As historian Mae Ngai states, “at its core, the law served contemporary prejudices among white Protestant Americans from northern European backgrounds and their desire to maintain social and political dominance.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, those who championed immigration restriction achieved a major victory as the Johnson-Reed Act discriminated without appearing discriminatory. It lowered overall immigration numbers while ensuring that the law privileged north and western European countries.

Perhaps the most drastic aspect of the debates surrounding immigration in the 1920s, however, was not necessarily the stringent quota system, though it mattered, but the shift in how the state understood and policed immigrant bodies with the establishment of the Border Patrol that same year. With the advent of the Border Patrol, what was once a porous border between the

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Congress. House of Representatives, House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, “Biological Aspects of Immigration,” statement from Harry H. Laughlin, 66<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, April 16-17, 1920.

<sup>7</sup> Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 22-23. Ngai has influenced my thinking on this topic, especially her chapters “The Quota Act” and “Deportation Policy.”

United States and Mexico (and, to a lesser extent, Canada), and the creation of illegal entry as a criminal matter rather than civil, the state “stimulated the production of illegal aliens and introduced that problem into the internal spaces of the nation.”<sup>8</sup> Essentially, the United States, through its restrictionist policies, informed by scientific racism of the era, created a new class of people: “illegal aliens.” In short, the state created the problem of unlawful entry, created a new agency to police the borders, and authorized new mechanisms to treat unlawful entry as a criminal offense, not just an administrative one.

Interestingly, one aspect of immigration policy the Johnson-Reed legislation did not address was immigration from the Western hemisphere. Indeed, while the thrust of the bill focused on southern and eastern Europeans, growers from the Southwest ensured that the bill had appropriate carve outs for Western hemisphere immigration. Growers did not do this for altruistic motives, their rationale was based upon pure political and economic necessity. Southwestern growers had grown accustomed to a steady diet of cheap labor from Mexico and challenged any law that would impinge on their economic interests. As historian George Sánchez notes, “immigration restrictions directed against Mexicans were at first consistently deferred under pressure by southwestern employers and then, when finally enacted, were mostly ignored by officials at the border.”<sup>9</sup>

But Southwestern grower hegemony was not absolute. East Texas Congressmen John Box, a member of the House Immigration and Naturalization Committee, was a forceful advocate for broadening the restrictions on Mexican immigration. He tried to pass legislation that

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<sup>8</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 57. For an excellent history of the border patrol, see Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra!: A History of the Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19. See also Hernández, *Migra!*

would place Mexico within the purview of the 1924 Immigration Act quota system. Mimicking eugenicist language, Box argued, “the importation of Mexican pauper contract laborers affords such opportunities as have produced serfdom in the past. It is producing the same bad fruit now, and the growth will be worse if the practice is continued.”<sup>10</sup> Ostensibly, Box couched his argument for Mexican restriction as a means to *protect* the Mexican laborer from exploitation from unscrupulous growers. He saw immigrants from Mexico as a class apart, neither deserving of citizenship nor did they have the capacity to utilize the fruits offered by U.S. citizenship. To his mind, Mexican laborers would be a drain on the bounty that was the United States, just like eastern and southern Europeans.

Unlike “undesirable” Europeans the specter of Mexican immigration was more acute precisely because of the proximity to Mexico and the ease with which one could stay in the United States. Box argued that there was little incentive for Mexicans to self-repatriate after their contract in the United States expired. They would simply stay which would be a drain on local resources. Mexican contract laborers were “turned loose to make their own way. Thousands are being fed by generous Texas but not by the men who secured their admission to this country to harvest the crops or to work on the ranches. They are without work. Many of them penniless and yet a goodly number have been arrested as vagrants and are no doubt working on Texas chain gangs.”<sup>11</sup> Here Box transitions from protecting *mexicano* laborers to protecting Anglo Texans. Like the periodicals in San Antonio which brought up the specter of the supposed lawless vagrant, Box used that racist and nativist imagery to criminalize *mexicano* farm workers. Box

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, The Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, “Imported Pauper Labor and Serfdom in America,” statement by Congressman John C. Box, 67<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, April 15, 1921.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

expertly crafted a racialist discourse within the hearings that tied in nativist, eugenicist, and imperialist thinking of the era together and mapped it onto brown bodies.

In another hearing on the so-called “Mexican problem,” Box explicitly called attention to the fact that intermarriage rates between whites and Mexicans were even higher than those between African Americans and Anglos. Box cut to the heart of the matter in his discussion of miscegenation, the very real fear that eugenicists and their sympathizers had about the “dilution” of Anglo-Saxon blood.

“No other alien people entering America have created freer channels for blood intermixture through intermarriage than do these Mexicans, with whom both black and white races intermarry to a limited extent. White and negro race stocks can not be kept separate when both intermarry, even to the limited extent of a few thousand instances, with some hundreds of thousands or millions and increasing numbers of Mexican immigrants. It must be kept in mind that the humbler classes of the Mexicans are basically Indian, many of whom have a strain of negro blood derived from black slaves carried to Mexico from African and the West Indies. Many of them have a considerable strain of Caucasian blood of Spanish and other stocks, sufficient to increase the number of intermarriages between them and Caucasian Americans, while their Indian and limited amount of African blood facilitates marriage between them and Negroes. Such a situation will make the blood of all three races flow back and forth in a distressing process of mongrelization.”<sup>12</sup>

In his discussion of “mongrelization,” Box eliminated any façade of feelings for the potential of Mexican labor exploitation by the hands of Southwestern growers. He cared little for *mexicano* laborers. Box called upon a longtime Southern trope: protecting the honor of white women. If the state continued to allow unchecked Mexican migration, the stakes were high: Congress risked the genocide of the Anglo-Saxon race through miscegenation. He even called upon the racist imagery of Mexicans as breeders in his testimony before the Committee to stoke appropriate fear

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, The Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, “Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere,” 71<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, March 14, 1930.

in the minds of fellow committee members. In his testimony, Box included testimonials of individuals from across the nation to offer anecdotal evidence to support his position. In one instance, William Michels from Houston, Texas stated as fact, “In view of their high birth rate and the falling rate among white people, if the present immigration keeps up a large part of Texas will have become thoroughly Mexicanized.” Furthermore, “If this influx of Mexicans to the United States is not checked or stopped,” A. L. Hill from Hillister, California argued, “it is going to badly oppress the American working man.” In other testimony, Box spoke about the poor living conditions in which many Mexican migrants found themselves without talking about the structural barriers that many Mexicans found themselves enmeshed in as they sought jobs in cities and towns throughout the southwest. According to John Young of Carpenteria, California, “Mexicans tend to collect in villages living in crowded and insanitary dwellings. They have lice, skin diseases, [and] venereal diseases.” In this framework, Mexicans themselves are unclean and carry disease hardly better than animals which allows Box to conclude that such behavior was indicative of the character and personal habits of “Mexican peon” class.<sup>13</sup> In both language and policy, then, the U.S. helped create and promulgate two overlapping processes: the racialization of *mexicanos* as foreign others and the racist corollary that they themselves inhabited unclean bodies.<sup>14</sup>

In Box’s desire to wrap Mexican immigration within the purview of the 1924 quota system, he pulled no punches as he advanced every racial stereotype and played upon every white racial fear to advance his political and ideological interests. It should be noted that Box

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, The Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, “Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere,” 71<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, March 14, 1930.

<sup>14</sup> Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 61-63.

was not an outlier in this type of racist thinking in the 1920s and 1930s. Pseudo-scientists and eugenicists created an entire scientific field to rationalize their own racial bias. Box and his cohort operated under the assumption that there was a categorical way to pinpoint racial differences in scientific terms. The insidious nature of the scientific racism of this era meant that scientists and eugenicists mapped racialized understandings onto policy which had material impacts on everyday people's lives. While the Box Bill never materialized, the underlying racist assumptions that undergird its creation remain remarkably persistent over time in the United States. As Mae Ngai argued, as the border became less porous and unauthorized crossings were criminalized, a similar process occurred within the psyche of the nation writ large: ideas of deserving and undeserving poor and illegal versus legal immigrant, closely tied to notions of good and bad immigrant manifested themselves in the popular imagination. As these constructs interacted with the racial topography of the U.S., many Anglos internalized them and then mapped them onto *mexicano* bodies. White supremacy gave these racial logics their pervasive staying power; so much so that "illegal immigration" became synonymous with ethnic Mexicans in the minds of white America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century despite its artificiality.

## **2.2 The Local Consequences of the "Mexican Problem"**

The racialization of Mexicans in the United States as "unclean," "inferior," and "lazy" had material impacts for this community especially during times of acute economic distress. During the Great Depression, San Antonio and other municipalities across the nation, politicians and bureaucrats had to make decisions about who received aid and who did not. Belonging, nativism, and "the Mexican question" became entangled in complex questions of political economy. How this played out on a local level varied widely. But, one tool advanced by the state at every level

was the use of “voluntary” repatriation of ethnic Mexicans during the Great Depression.<sup>15</sup> Texas led the nation in this ignominious agenda as it repatriated more than 70 percent of all Mexicans (and Mexican Americans), or around 345,839 men, women, and children.<sup>16</sup> And the state often caught up American citizens of Mexican heritage in its deportation drives. Racialized assumptions about *mexicanos* helped the state enact the policy of repatriation. Ethnic Mexicans thus became an easy scapegoat for white bureaucrats and politicians looking to blame the lack of resources on a particular group of people, or conserve resources for the more “deserving.” In San Antonio, for example, The Relief and Rehabilitation Committee of San Antonio (RRCSA) “identified illegal foreign residents in its jurisdiction with the twin purpose of removing them from their relief rolls and expelling them from their country.”<sup>17</sup> Local and state authorities began to articulate the notion that *mexicanos* were burdens on already constrained state and local budgets which helped to rationalize the deportation and repatriation drives which occurred across the United States during the Great Depression.

In San Antonio, deportation was a real fear for some *mexicanos*. Richard Garcia’s study of the San Antonio Mexican American middle-class notes that some *mexicanos*, especially working class *mexicanos*, lived in fear of “North Americans” because of the potential for deportation.<sup>18</sup> However, San Antonio’s ethnic Mexican community had divergent views on the

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the Mexican government also participated in the repatriation drives for their own internal reasons as well. The point here, however, is that the U.S.’s adoption of this policy was strategic and designed to pressure *mexicanos* to voluntarily repatriate through coercion. For a look at both sides of the repatriation debate, see Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso et al, *They Should Stay There: The Story of Mexican Migration and Repatriation During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Fernando Saúl Alanís Enciso et al, *They Should Stay There: The Story of Mexican Migration and Repatriation During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class, San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas

deportation question, just like immigration in general. These differences usually broke down along class lines. More affluent Mexican Americans believed that low wage Mexican labor ought not deleteriously affect the livelihood of American citizens.

Alonso Perales, a middle class Mexican American lawyer, born in Alice, Texas, and one of the founding members of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) represented a good example of this position. During the House hearings on the Box bill, Perales gave testimony before Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. He made it clear that he neither supported nor rejected the Box bill; rather, he was there “to promote the welfare of Texas—of the American people.” Perales opened with a spirited defense of his cultural heritage. Like many of his peers in LULAC, he saw himself American first. But to be American was not to necessarily reject one’s Mexican heritage. He understood the complicated nature of identity and that one could be multiple things at any given time. Indeed, the first statement he made to the committee was to reject the mischaracterization about Mexican people some members made during the hearing. He argued that Mexicans were not inherently inferior to Americans. He presented himself, a respectable Mexican American lawyer, as evidence that ethnic Mexicans could become “respectable” and, if they chose, could become American citizens. Discriminatory treatment by the state, such as that embodied in the Box bill, rather than inherent cultural inferiority, prevented many ethnic Mexicans from achieving their aspirations; he understood that first hand in Texas. Thus, LULAC’s main mission was to “develop within the members of our

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A&M University Press, 1991), 115.

race the best, purest, and most perfect type of a true and loyal citizens of the United States of America.”<sup>19</sup>

One of the members, Mr. Green, had a brief exchange with Perales that is illuminating:

Mr. Green: I would like to ask the gentleman if he believes we should have any restrictions on immigration from Mexico to the United States.

Mr. Perales: Yes; if you can prove that these Mexicans came here to compete with American citizens.

[...]

Mr. Green: Would it not be better, then, for us to thoroughly Americanize all the foreign strains we have in our country rather than to permit others to come in?

Mr. Perales: As to the method of doing, I do not care to answer one way of [sic] the other. I believe I have made myself very clear, *that I am for any measure that will tend to promote the welfare and happiness of the American people*; and therefore, if the sponsors of this bill or any other bill can prove that the Mexicans—that is those from Mexico—are a menace to the American workingmen, because they come here and work for lower wages, then I say all right; good luck to you; more power to you. *But if you have not the facts to prove that this is the reason, and the only reason, why these Mexicans ought to be restricted, and therefore avail yourselves of utterly fictitious reasons, such as racial inferiority, race degeneracy, then I say, gentlemen, you are absolutely wrong as to that.*”<sup>20</sup>

Perales’s comments to the committee masterfully articulate his resentment to the racist ideology that undergirded the Box bill. First, he felt compelled to assert his own Americanness in front of the committee because of how Anglos racialized *mexicanos*. Perales, and LULAC by extension, recognized that to be legible to Anglo members of Congress, or perhaps any Anglo authority figure, he first had to prove he was a “respectable” American. Second, the exchange illustrated

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<sup>19</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, “Western Hemisphere Immigration,” 71<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, Jan. 16, 1930.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, “Western Hemisphere Immigration,” 71<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session, Jan. 16, 1930. Emphasis mine.

the degree to which Perales never abandoned a sense of pride in his cultural heritage. Yes, he was American but that did not, in Perales's mind, diminish his cultural heritage. Perales's criticism of the Box bill illuminated the complicated tight wire he, and other LULAC members, had to walk. On the one hand, he argued that because he was American, of course he would support any legislation promoted the interest of *all* Americans. But, because of his Mexican cultural heritage, and growing up in Texas where ethnic Mexicans, regardless of nationality, faced fierce discrimination, he would not stand for any bill that was based on thinly veiled racist propaganda. Thus, any bill restricting Mexican immigration on the basis of "racial inferiority" or "racial degeneracy" was wholly wrong and, as important for Perales, anathema to the spirit of a country that he fought for in World War I. Perales, like other middle-class Mexican Americans had a complicated relationship to the question of Mexican immigration.<sup>21</sup>

In the late 1930s, San Antonio's mayor commissioned a study on the state of the public welfare services available in the city. It found numerous areas where the city, county, and private welfare agencies could better coordinate their efforts to achieve more reach to more needy members of the community. The report paid attention to the ethnic Mexican community. It found that low wages and massive unemployment created a cycle of "dependence" on relief agencies among the ethnic Mexican community.<sup>22</sup> The report concluded that such dependence worsened because of the influx of people into San Antonio both because it served as a hub for agricultural recruitment to other areas of Texas and the wider United States and because of the crash of the cotton industry. People moved to the city looking for work which placed additional strain on the

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> American Public Welfare Association, *Public Welfare Survey of San Antonio, Texas*, 1940. San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection, p. 22.

city's resources. One of its principle recommendations to the mayor's office was repatriation. The report concluded that "changing agricultural and industrial conditions have caused a concentration in San Antonio and reduced their [ethnic Mexican] opportunities for employment, and that the fact is undeniable that there are many more Latin-Americans than can be gainfully employed, and that thousands of them are aliens who are ineligible to W.P.A work." Further, it "seems only fair that the matter of repatriation be considered carefully both by the City of San Antonio and the Mexican government."<sup>23</sup> While the authors of the report wished to convey that they reached this conclusion not based on any racial animus, it is clear that the authors saw ethnic Mexicans as a burden on municipal resources—a problem to solve, rather than a constituency to help. Indeed, the *San Antonio Express* put it in starker terms with an above the fold article "Non-Citizens Drain Relief Fund" although that was only one of several findings of the report. This highlights the degree to which the national immigration policy and debate over the "Mexican Problem" intersected with realities on the ground in local communities. For many, one solution to tight budgets was to deport, repatriate, or remove Spanish surnames from relief rolls to provide services to other residents. For many residents on the West Side, this meant that they would have to look to one another for support during the Depression and in the absence of the state.

### **2.3 Eleuterio Escobar, LULAC, and The School Improvement League: Creating Community from the Ground Up**

In post-World War I San Antonio, local San Antonio businessman Eleuterio Escobar and other ethnic Mexicans established and/or joined culturally inflected civic organizations such as

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<sup>23</sup> American Public Welfare Association, *Public Welfare Survey of San Antonio, Texas*, 1940. San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection, Appendix A.

the Order Knights of American (OKA) and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) to facilitate community and mitigate the effects of the segregationist order that disfranchised their daily lives. Mexican Americans believed they had to organize if they wanted to get ahead in the United States. To that end, they created civic organizations like the OKA, which was dedicated to the education of “its members, who are to be composed exclusively of descendants of the Mexican Race in their rights and obligations as citizens or inhabitants of the United States.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike its successor, LULAC, the OKA was a much more egalitarian civic organization that allowed all ethnic Mexicans, regardless of citizenship status, to join in their efforts to, as Mauro Machado put it, “make equal rights the master of might.”<sup>25</sup> It is key to note that the OKA’s stated purpose was to educate the community on their *rights* as citizens or *inhabitants* of the United States. Underneath its mission statement is a picture of the Statue of Liberty holding a scroll inscribed with the phrase, “Knowledge is Power.” Like Escobar, the members of the OKA believed education was the key to break the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination that plagued the West Side. But the nationalism imbued in the actual Statue of Liberty itself pointed to how many in the OKA also embraced a qualified Americanness.

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<sup>24</sup> “Objects and Principles,” *OKA News*, December 1927, Folder 2, Box 1, Oliver Weeks Collection, LULAC Archives, Benson Latin American Collection, the University of Texas at Austin. Hereinafter cited as Weeks Collection.

<sup>25</sup> Mauro Machado, “An Answer to Our Critics,” *OKA News*, January 1928, Folder 2, Box 1, Weeks Collection.



Figure 2.1: Motto of the Order Knights of America: Knowledge is Power.<sup>26</sup>

To that end, the OKA created the *OKA News*, a monthly newsletter dedicated to providing a space in which ethnic Mexicans could discuss issues relevant to the wider Mexican American and Mexican national community in San Antonio. In a column about the deleterious effects of the sharecropping system on the education of Mexican youth, future LULAC President

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<sup>26</sup> *OKA News*, December 1927, Folder 5, Box 1, Weeks Collection.

M.C. Gonzales argued, “Our friend the Mexican farmer, unlike his partner in business, the American farmer, if he raises a good crop he makes enough to barely pay the previous year’s debts. . . .But the unfortunate feature of that situation is that he [the Mexican farmer] ekes a mere existence notwithstanding the fact that he has forced all of his boys and girls, from 7 to 18 years of age, to work through the year. . . . The tender mind and body of the Mexican youth at the age of ten has become hardened by the crude and strenuous work to which he has been subjected. . . . The little fellow’s body is tired, he can know no recreation or relaxation . . . the mind is overwrought with the cold, while breaking the land for planting of the seed, or with the heat while picking cotton. It is no wonder then, that in such instances, where Mexican children get the opportunity to attend school, even tho’ [sic] it be for a limited time, they are not permitted to join his young American friend.”<sup>27</sup>

Gonzales framed his column in a liberal discourse about the need to appeal to Anglo farmers’ sense of fair play by paying a living wage to Mexican laborers. Gonzales felt that the solution to inadequate education for Mexican youth meant an appeal to the individual attitudes of white farmers. An increase in agricultural workers’ wages would then result in greater educational access for Mexican youth because their parents would no longer depend on their children’s labor as integral to the family economy. Despite his impassioned plea, Gonzales failed to connect larger systemic processes such as spatial segregation, economic inequality, and discrimination that reproduced inequality in ethnic Mexican communities. Nevertheless, by writing a column in a bilingual newspaper that produced 1,500 free copies distributed throughout the West Side, Gonzales’ critiques of low wages for Mexican agricultural workers and its effects

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<sup>27</sup> M.C. Gonzales, “The Mexican Youth,” *OKA News*, December 1927, Folder 2, Box 1, Weeks Collection.

on their children, created the atmosphere and possibility for establishing a wider discourse surrounding educational equality in San Antonio.<sup>28</sup>

Bilingualism is key here because it connected the developing English-speaking middle class with the working class and *mexicano* communities living in San Antonio. That the newspaper operated in a dual language format suggests that English speaking ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio embraced both their cultural heritage and their home in the United States. Members of the *OKA* knew that to achieve their stated goals to “bring about greater progress and general advancement” for “citizens and inhabitants of the United States of America,” their organization had to embrace bilingualism as that governed the constituency they sought to “elevate.”<sup>29</sup> Bilingualism was not an apolitical space for ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio; it was inherently political as it allowed Spanish-speaking people the social space necessary for community development. It encouraged ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio to take pride in their cultural heritage despite the hegemonic discourse that sought to whitewash their history. It fostered community by strengthening cultural ties to one another in the San Antonio *barrio*. In a racialized space such as San Antonio’s West Side, bilingualism was integral for identity formation and essential for survival for many Spanish speaking Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals.

By 1929, the *OKA* vanished, incorporated into the larger Mexican American organization, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929. Historians such as David Gutiérrez have criticized LULAC’s policy to

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<sup>28</sup> Orozco, 87.

<sup>29</sup> “Objects and Principles,” *OKA News*, December 1927, Folder 2, Box 1, Weeks Collection.

limit its membership to Americans of Mexican descent.<sup>30</sup> Gutierrez argues, “by deciding to focus its efforts exclusively on behalf of the American-citizen population, LULAC in effect chose to abandon hundreds of thousands of other ethnic Mexicans who had also come to consider the United States their permanent home.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the first tenet of LULAC’s founding charter states, “To develop among the members of our race the better, more pure and perfect type of true and loyal citizens of the United States of America.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, article four of the same document reads, “The acquisition of the English language, which is the official language of our country, is necessary for the enjoyment of all our rights and privileges, for which reason we declare that it is the official language of the Organization and we shall endeavor for the same reason to learn it, to speak it, and to teach it to our children.”<sup>33</sup> Clearly, then, Gutiérrez has a valid critique of LULAC’s stance toward exclusion.

Yet, like most things, LULAC’s policy toward Mexican nationals was slightly more complicated as the Perales testimony suggested. Perales articulated LULAC’s position on Mexican nationals in a statement he issued to local papers. He argued that Mexican Americans do not “wish to segregate themselves maliciously, and to despise their own brothers of race, the Mexican citizens, for whom they always have the most sincere affection. No. It is one thing to deny one’s racial origin and a very distinct thing to try to be a loyal and conscientious citizen to struggle, on a basis of an indisputable patriotism, for one’s rights and prerogatives. This last is

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<sup>30</sup> Gutiérrez, 77-78. To be fair, Gutiérrez does offer a nuanced but ultimately unsatisfactory vision of LULAC in *Walls and Mirrors*. He argues that LULAC’s integrationist stance was in part based on the increasing racism and hostility in the dominant culture toward immigration during the interwar and post-WWII period.

<sup>31</sup> Gutiérrez, 79.

<sup>32</sup> Alonso Perales, “The Unification of the Mexican-Americans,” Folder 13, Box 1, Weeks Collection.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

what the American citizens of Latin origins are trying to do. The day that the Mexican-American betters his condition and finds himself in a position of being able to make useful his rights of citizenship, that day he will be in a position to aid the mexican [sic] citizens.”<sup>34</sup> For Perales, and the leadership of LULAC, Mexican Americans had to first achieve power and equality within their own ranks before they could assist their Mexican brethren. This harkens back to Perales’s testimony before Congress. For Perales, what mattered was for Mexican Americans to be treated equally under the law and for the United States to embrace policy that reflected its liberal values, not ones based upon pseudo-scientific beliefs that denigrated Perales’s cultural heritage. For Perales, the first battle in the fight for equality meant creating equality for Mexican Americans and then work to improve the lives of their “brethren” when they could.

The establishment of LULAC was an important milestone for the Mexican American community. In LULAC, Mexican Americans finally had an organization that could collectively fight against racial discrimination that affected their daily lives. Part of LULAC’s early success related to its federated structure. Each community established a local chapter to address the specific needs of that neighborhood. San Antonio had several important locals throughout the years, but the two most important for this study, were Council 2 headed by M.C. Gonzales and Council 16 headed by Alonso Perales. Both individuals would become LULAC presidents. In San Antonio, both Gonzales and Perales would set the tone and pace for other councils.

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<sup>34</sup> Alonso Perales, “The Unification of the Mexican American III,” Folder 13, Box 1, Weeks Collection.

From the beginning, LULAC founders wanted the organization to remain non-partisan. Its constitution stated, “this society is not a political club, but as citizens we shall participate in the local political contests of the State and of the Nation, under a point of view of collective interest.”<sup>35</sup> Clearly, LULAC wanted to remain a viable advocacy group that would engender the broadest possible support and likely did not want to upset the Democratic machine in city’s such as San Antonio. Despite LULAC’s official non-partisan stance, its members were extremely politically active. As Richard Garcia put it, “from the middle of the 1930s through the 1940s, LULAC members (and other middle-class activists) were part of every political, social, or welfare activity in San Antonio, either as individuals or as LULAC members.”<sup>36</sup> This burgeoning middle class Mexican American consciousness grew in strength and ideological coherency as LULAC councils interacted with the community.

One of the earliest examples of LULAC members attempting to challenge the Democratic Party machine that had ruled San Antonio politics for decades came with the formation of the Association of Independent Voters (AIV) in 1932. One prominent businessman, LULAC lifetime member, Eleuterio Escobar, would gain prominence through his efforts with AIV. On the African American east side, Charles Bellinger, a gambler, entrepreneur, and businessman worked created his own successful patronage machine. Bellinger had an arrangement with Mayor C.K. Quin in which he would routinely deliver votes in exchange for special treatment in his gambling operations and other political favors such as paved streets, better parks, and schools.<sup>37</sup> The *San Antonio Light* found that at his height of power, Bellinger could deliver “5000

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<sup>35</sup> Alonso Perales, “The Unification of the Mexican American,” Folder 13, Box 1, Weeks Collection.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, p. 272.

<sup>37</sup> John A. Booth and David R. Johnson, “Power and Progress in San Antonio Politics, 1936-1970,” in John A. Booth and David R. Johnson, eds., *The Politics of San Antonio: Community, Progress, Power* (Lincoln: University

or 6000” votes to the Democratic political machine.<sup>38</sup> The AIV was the West Side’s initial attempt to influence political campaigns by speaking in one political voice on the West Side.

The AIV was a political organization designed to benefit the interests of Mexican Americans. Therefore, they vowed to participate in all elections, back candidates who did not discriminate against Mexican Americans, wanted to ensure that Mexican Americans received the “same consideration” as Anglos “when their interests come before the city, county, state, and national authorities for adjudication,” and supported any candidates who promised to give Mexican Americans fair political representation at all levels of government.<sup>39</sup> In short, AIV became one of the earliest political lobbying organizations for ethnic Mexicans. Moreover, like the Bellinger machine on the East Side, the AIV wanted to create a coalition of voters to curry favor with the Democratic machine in San Antonio.

To ensure that they backed the “right” sort of candidates, the AIV sent out a questionnaire to candidates running for elected office. The AIV’s questionnaire was designed to illustrate the bias of a candidate, if they responded. For example, the AIV asked questions about whether the candidate would promise to appoint Mexican Americans to office once elected. In one election, a few candidates responded to the AIV which suggested that the Anglo candidates would, at least, entertain the notion of a *mexicano* block of voters. In an answer to the questionnaire, the candidate’s responses were quite milquetoast. Mr. Wurzbach suggested that he

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of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 16; Richard Henderson, *Maury Maverick: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), p. 178.

<sup>38</sup> *San Antonio Light*, August 28, 1938.

<sup>39</sup> “Aims & Purposes of the Association of Independent Voters,” Folder 1, Box 2, The Eleuterio Escobar Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, the University of Texas at Austin. Hereinafter cited as Escobar Papers.

would like to have “more contact with your race” and promised to stop the exploitation of ethnic Mexicans if elected. D.F. Davis said he had not yet hired any ethnic Mexicans but would work with the AIV considering the hiring of ethnic Mexicans if elected. J.S. McNeel one upped everyone by boasting, “If successful I’ll have plenty of Mexican deputies in office.” Future liberal mayor of San Antonio, Maury Maverick, Jr. simply stated, “I will employ any person that is capable and will discriminate [sic] against no race. Any candidate should afford fair representation to the latins [sic] and could do no more.”<sup>40</sup> To elicit more actionable responses from the candidates, the AIV would have to had likely illustrated a pattern of being able to bring out the vote for their favored candidate. Since they were a new organization, they did not yet have the clout. That Mexican Americans formed AIV after the establishment of LULAC was not a coincidence. LULAC provided many Mexican Americans the platform and organizational apparatus to begin tentative steps toward asserting their rights to full citizenship.

Nevertheless, the AIV never garnered as much political support as did the Bellinger machine on the East Side. Likely *mexicanos* racialized status, and especially fears of the state in terms of deportation had a delimiting effect on the AIV political organizing efforts—during the Great Depression, the state cared little about the citizenship status of *mexicanos*. Eleuterio Escobar hinted at this when he suggested that many *mexicanos* did not participate in the political process because they feared retaliation.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the “traditional” barriers to the franchise were all in place during this period: the white primary and the poll tax were especially effective at suppressing the vote. Nevertheless, the formation of the AIV illustrates the degree to which ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio attempted to organize albeit through fits and starts, initially,

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<sup>40</sup> Questionnaire to Political Candidates, June 11, 1932, Folder 1, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

<sup>41</sup> Eleuterio Escobar, “Autobiography, Final Draft,” Folder 5, Box 1, Escobar Papers.

since there was no road map for them to follow. Yet, the AIV did have some concrete victories within the San Antonio municipal government.<sup>42</sup> Escobar delighted in the AIV's gains. After one election, Escobar declared that San Antonio now had its "first Mexican American county Judge secretary, the first Mexican American County clerk secretary, [and] the present Boxing commissioner."<sup>43</sup> From his vantage, the inclusion of ethnic Mexican representatives in positions of authority must have been an important victory given that white politicians often relegated *mexicanos* to the janitorial positions within the municipal government.<sup>44</sup> More broadly, the AIV was a first step that engendered a sense of community and, with each victory, no matter how small, brought prominence towards LULAC's collective efforts to create a more democratic society for Mexican Americans.

After the elections of 1932, the AIV died of "natural causes" and internal division.<sup>45</sup> But, Eleuterio Escobar had learned lessons in organizing from his brief foray into electoral politics. This time, however, he set his sights on education within the *barrio*. LULAC Council #16 established the Committee for Playground and School Facilities (CPSF). Its major functions were to shed light on the poor conditions that plagued schools on the West Side, especially elementary schools, and to combat the deleterious effects of residential segregation, disinvestment, and to highlight San Antonio Independent School District's (SAISD) disinclination toward improving the school facilities on the West Side. As chairman of the CPSF,

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<sup>42</sup> For more on San Antonio electoral politics during this period, see Rodolfo Rosales, *Illusion of Inclusion*, David R. Johnson et al, *The Politics of San Antonio*, Richard Garcia, *The Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, and David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*.

<sup>43</sup> Eleuterio Escobar, "Autobiography, Final Draft," Folder 5, Box 1, Escobar Papers.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Eleuterio Escobar, Autobiography Final Draft, Folder 5, Box 1, Escobar Papers.

Escobar commissioned a study to survey schools in the *barrio*, so he could present evidence of SAISD malfeasance to anyone willing to listen. Published on September 27, 1934, Escobar used the document as ammunition to gain wide-ranging support from various businessmen in San Antonio, religious leaders, and even state representatives in Austin. Indeed, over the course of the next decade, state representative J. Franklin Spears (D) would become one of Escobar's most ardent supporters in the Texas legislature.<sup>46</sup>

The survey's findings were striking. It focused its attention on three key areas: overcrowding, funding inequity, and space for recreation. Each of these three components were easily observable and documentable phenomenon. For example, when compared to other schools within the district, schools on the North Side of San Antonio—where most of the Anglos lived along with the location of the incorporated affluent bedroom community of Alamo Heights. The survey concluded that the average class size on the West Side was forty-eight whereas the median class size for the other schools was thirty-three. According to the scholastic census, the number of children that attended the schools were about the same but the disparity laid within the number of classrooms available. The North Side schools had 368 rooms versus 259 to house over 12,000 students.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of the overcrowded nature of schools on the West Side, many students had to attend half day classes. For example, at Bowie Elementary, the student capacity based on the number of available rooms for the 1935 school year was 700, yet its student enrollment was

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<sup>46</sup> See numerous correspondences from state representatives to Escobar in Folder 3, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

<sup>47</sup> LULAC Survey, "More and Better Schools for the Western Section," Folder 2, Box 2, Escobar Papers. Hereafter referred to as LULAC survey.

1190, resulting in 490 “excess” students.<sup>48</sup> In order to accommodate all students, Bowie administrators held classes in three shifts: four classes in the morning ran from 8:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.; four afternoon classes went from 12:30 to 5:00 p.m.; and 13 classes went all day. As a temporary solution to alleviate overcrowding, Bowie administrators also transferred some students to three separate schools.<sup>49</sup> But they also urgently insisted that “Latin-American children need a full day. One term or so on half-time may be made up by the efforts of the teacher, but something should be done to remedy half-day sessions as soon as possible.”<sup>50</sup> Clearly, then, the overcrowding of West Side schools meant less time spent on the education of ethnic Mexicans. Bowie’s principal admitted as much when he stated that only through extra effort by the teacher could mitigate this disadvantage. Yet, this premise was based on the assumption that: (1) white teachers in West Side schools had the inclination to work twice as hard to teach to student many may have regarded as inherently inferior given the racialized order of the time and (2) that teachers on the West Side had the time in a school term to essentially teach a full year’s course load in half the time. LULAC and Escobar understood this fact and made overcrowding their top priority as they battled with SAISD board members during the interwar years.

The second issue the survey shed light on was the fact that SAISD discriminated against ethnic Mexicans on the West Sides by allocating more school funds to the North Side than the West Side. Article VII, Section 1 of Texas’ constitution stated, “A general diffusion of knowledge, being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Principal of Bowie Elementary to SAISD (?), October 23, 1934, Folder 6, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

the duty of the legislature of the state to establish and make suitable provisions for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools.”<sup>51</sup> To that end, “All available public schools funds of this State shall be appropriated in each county for the education alike of white and colored children, and impartial provision shall be made for both races.” Thus, the State of Texas allocated funds to school districts based on student enrollment, which amounted to, in 1934 dollars, \$16.00 per student.<sup>52</sup> Independent school districts in Texas, such as SAISD, also received a substantial portion of its education funds by assessing and collecting revenue from local property taxes.<sup>53</sup> Essential for our purposes, however, was that the state delegated to the districts the authority to allocate funds at their discretion.

Based on 1934 numbers, the LULAC survey assessed the total revenue SAISD received from the state and local property taxes and concluded that, “the School Board deprives the eleven schools of the western section of the important sum of \$350,000 per year.” Using SAISD’s own figures, then, LULAC felt confident when it claimed that SAISD board misappropriated funds collected within the West Side to use in other areas of the district. The West Side schools had fewer classrooms, operated in shifts, employed fewer teachers, but still received less per pupil than other areas in district. In April 1934, LULAC insisted that the district spent only \$23.68 per student compared to the \$35.52 spent per student on the North Side.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, since Texas

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<sup>51</sup> Article VII of Texas state constitution, “The Public Free Schools,” Folder 3, Box 2, Escobar Papers. The constitution specifically defines “colored race” and “colored children” as “all persons of mixed blood descended from negro [sic] ancestry.”

<sup>52</sup> LULAC Survey, Folder 2, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

<sup>53</sup> Chapter 5 will go into detail about public school financing in Texas.

<sup>54</sup> LULAC to SAISD Board, n.d., Folder 2, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

state law did not specify how local school districts could allocate funds within their district, any legal argument LULAC might have made never materialized.

The final aspect of the survey related to lack of physical space for student development and recreation. Along with inadequate school funding, the issue of space was perhaps most important to Escobar. One of the reasons was that the disparity between rich and poor, white and brown was glaringly obvious when you looked at two schools within the same district. For example, Lanier Junior/Senior High School and the freshly built, state of the art Thomas Jefferson High School located a few miles to the northwest. LULAC estimated that of the six high schools in the SAISD, Lanier Junior and Senior high school only had two and a half acres of facility space compared to Thomas Jefferson which rested on 30 acres of land.<sup>55</sup> So prestigious was Thomas Jefferson, that *Life* magazine did a cover story on the school in 1938. Thomas Jefferson had everything a student could hope for including two gyms, a cafeteria, and even an armory for their large JROTC (Junior Reserved Officers Training Corps) program.<sup>56</sup> During the height of the depression when *mexicanos* stood in breadlines in front of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, SAISD spent \$1.5 million dollars on the school.<sup>57</sup> And until the 1940s, Thomas Jefferson remained a segregated space for both African American students and *mexicanos*. Furthermore, it boasted of small class sizes and many college-bound students. It was no wonder that local LULAC councils and Escobar made conducting the survey an important initial step.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> “One American High School: The Thomas Jefferson of San Antonio,” *Life*, March 7, 1938.

<sup>57</sup> LULAC to SAISD Board, n.d., Folder 2, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

In the months leading up to the survey's publication, Escobar and LULAC had a falling out. On April 4, 1934, Escobar submitted his resignation as chairman of the CPSF. Escobar needed money to fund the survey project but met with lukewarm support among LULAC Council #16 members. "After terrible opposition [toward fund raising] some offered to contribute . . . five, four, three, and two dollars, etc., after this had been finally arranged someone bitterly opposed this action and suggested that no one should pay more than \$1.00," Escobar lamented. He continued, "At that moment I had before my eyes 14,000 children of our race taking punishment, abuse, and humiliation." A clearly frustrated Escobar felt ashamed that he was "unable to drive home the seriousness of the situation" to member of LULAC who, at least rhetorically, supported the tenants of social justice and access to educational equality enshrined in their constitution.

It seems that LULAC's local leadership did not accept Escobar's resignation and convinced him to stay on as chairman a little longer. Escobar's resignation letter, which he was genuinely reticent to give, seemed to spark a fire under LULAC Council #16 President Dr. O. Jerodetti. Days after receiving Escobar's resignation letter, LULAC drafted a petition to the SAISD school board urging them for a meeting to go over the data compiled on the unfinished survey. Hearing no response from SAISD, over the course of a few weeks, Jerodetti mailed no less than four additional letters to the SAISD requesting a meeting. These requests all appeared to go unanswered by the SAISD board. As Jerodetti noted, "we call your attention to the fact that we have heretofore made four requests for such hearings" but "we have received no reply" to any "of these letters."<sup>58</sup> In an effort to apply more pressure to the SAISD board, LULAC sent

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<sup>58</sup> Jerodetti to SAISD, May 5, 1934, Folder 2, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

a letter a local newspaper hoping to “enlist” its help “on behalf of the work we have undertaken.”<sup>59</sup> It appears that Escobar and LULAC spent the summer preparing the final draft of the survey, which they completed in that September.

The value in the survey was more than simply quantifying inequality on the West Side, of which it did a masterful job. Instead, Escobar ascribed meaning to the document by creating a publicity campaign backed by the data contained in its pages. West Side residents knew all too well the discrimination that existed in their everyday lives, but as Escobar spoke truth to power, he mobilized an entire community around one salient issue: educational inequality. As historian Mario T. García writes, “[d]issatisfied with the school board’s response and fearful of losing momentum, the committee solicited public support to achieve its objectives.”<sup>60</sup> Armed with the completed survey, Escobar “personally contacted a variety of both Mexican-American and Anglo organizations, labor unions, and many in San Antonio’s religious community.”<sup>61</sup> Along the margin of a letter template that went out to hundreds of supporters listed the names of people and organizations that supported Escobar and LULAC’s efforts in opposition to unequal education. Among the list of names were: Alianza Hispano-Americana, Baptist Good Will Center, Comerciantes al Menudeo y Pequeñas Industrias, Democratic Club, Home of Neighborly Service, Mexican Chamber of Commerce, Mexican Christian Institute, Mexican Protestant

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<sup>59</sup> Salinas to McIntosh, May 11, 1934, Folder 2, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

<sup>60</sup> Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 69.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Social Workers, Oder Sons of America, Pecan Shelling Workers Union, Rev. C. Tranchese, Rev. James T. Lockwood, and the Wesley Community House.<sup>62</sup>

Armed with his data and supporters, Escobar held a large public rally on October 24, 1934. Thousands of local community activists, everyday citizens, public dignitaries, and, most importantly, school officials attended the event. Escobar recalled with enthusiasm that, “8,000 people were [already] gathered at that giant meeting” with “5,000 men, women, and children marching to attend.”<sup>63</sup> For Escobar, the rally marked the fruition of a dream long deterred. His hard work and efforts as chairman of the CPSF had begun to bear fruit. “That was the most impo[r]tent, impressive and emotional scene that I have ever seen,” Escobar said as he witnessed the sea of people attending his meeting, listening to the plight of ethnic Mexican children.<sup>64</sup> Local attorney Carl Wright Johnson argued, “There is no question about it that these West Side children are being deprived of an adequate education by our state school board officials and are victims of abuses and discrimination.”<sup>65</sup> Escobar remembered that the crowd erupted in applause several times during Johnson’s impassioned speech. Moved by the crowd and speeches given that night, state superintendent Mr. Woods promised, “I will see to it that your school children’s problems be [sic] corrected.” Escobar wryly noted that Woods’s words ultimately proved hollow, as he “never fulfilled his promise.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Letter Template, September 28, 1934, Folder 2, Box 2, Escobar Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Eleuterio Escobar, Autobiography Final Draft, Folder 5, Box 1, Escobar Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Despite the Woods empty platitudes, October 14, 1934, marked a turning point for Escobar. After the October rally, San Antonians who did not yet know the name Eleuterio Escobar soon would. Indeed, his popularity and ability to mobilize support for his cause enabled him to break free from LULAC and establish his own organization. In December 1934, backed by a throng of supporters, Escobar created *La Liga Pro-Defensa Escolar* (The School Improvement League). As president of the School Improvement League (SIL) during the interwar years, Escobar continued his battle with the SAISD school board but shifted his battleground. Exploiting connections in the Texas state legislature, Escobar pushed for the passage of a bill that would reduce the term limits for school board members from six years to two. From Escobar's perspective, shorter term limits would force SAISD board members to be more responsive to the community. Author of the bill, J. Franklin Spears, wrote to Escobar and insisted that he, "got on Fellbaum [education committee chair in the senate] for not answering your telegrams. . . . The thing for you to do is to press him in every way that you can, as it is now out of our hands practically."<sup>67</sup> Escobar thus began a letter writing campaign in support of the bill that brought in supporters from across Texas. According to one historian, supporters sent over 200 telegrams to the state legislature to help push the bill through congress.<sup>68</sup> Many of the telegrams addressed to State Senator Fellbaum, sent via Western Union, simply demanded that he support bill "three forty[-]six."<sup>69</sup> A few noted the civic or business organizations in which the sender was affiliated. Despite the outpouring of support, and although the bill received enough

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<sup>67</sup> Spears to Escobar, February 7, 1935, Folder 2, Box 3, Escobar Papers.

<sup>68</sup> García, *Mexican Americans*, 72.

<sup>69</sup> Tafolla, Sr. to Fellbaum, February 4, 1935, Folder 2, Box 3, Escobar Papers.

votes to pass the Texas House, it ultimately failed to garner enough support to clear Fellbaum's senate education committee.<sup>70</sup>

The end of the letter writing campaign would mark an end to Escobar's activism until after the war. One historian argues that LULAC's activities nearly grounded to a halt because of the war. "The ranks of local chapters were decimated by members leaving for service. Many LULAC leaders emphasized the need for Mexican Americans to prove their loyalty by serving their county," says Craig Kapowitz.<sup>71</sup> During the postwar period, Escobar continued to fight for better and safer schools for the children on the West Side. He regularly attended SAISD school board meetings and proved to be quite a thorn in SAISD's side as he constantly pressed the SAISD to equally distribute funding to West Side schools.

On October 7, 1947, the SIL emerged from its hiatus and continued its efforts in the community. One of SIL's first acts was to redefine itself as a corporation. Much of the spirit of the interwar period remained with SIL in the postwar years as the articles of incorporation state the purpose of SIL was "charitable and educational" and to "promote better education among inhabitants of Latin-American descent."<sup>72</sup> With its incorporation came a greater degree of professionalization within the organization. This seems in part due to Escobar's partners Tomas Acuna and Anastacio Caballero. Caballero ] played a great role in helping the SIL professionalize as he served as Escobar's secretary. As such, Caballero responded to much of the correspondence coming into the SIL office. Escobar, however, likely signed off on any

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<sup>70</sup> García, *Mexican Americans*, 72.

<sup>71</sup> Craig Kaplowitz, *LULAC, Mexican Americans, and National Policy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 39.

<sup>72</sup> Student Improvement League, Articles of Incorporation, October 7, 1947, Folder 1, Box 4, Escobar Papers.

important correspondence that Caballero sent off as the company stationary usually had a space for “Eleuterio Escobar, President of the Student Improvement League” towards the bottom of the document.

With this professionalization and the hard-won public stature awarded to him in his battles with the SAISD school board on behalf of children from the *barrio* during the 1930s, came a greater degree of confidence in his letters to the various organizations, including the school board. I note this difference in attitude because people seemed to respond and perhaps even respect Escobar in a way that was not readily apparent during the early years of the public school battle. Because of Escobar’s noticeable change in demeanor, increased stature within the community, and professionalization of the SIL, many avenues of publicity that may have been closed off to him during the interwar years became available during the postwar period; a weapon he used with remarkable skill, eloquence, and it greatly increased public awareness of his efforts. Indeed, when the SIL reformed in 1947 they had the support of over “eighty Civic, Social, Fraternal and Religious Organizations.”<sup>73</sup>

In the postwar period, the SIL once again took up the call to ensure that “every section of our city is served equally, by an adequate, modern, up to high standard school system.”<sup>74</sup> To that end, the SIL sent a document to the SAISD school board summarizing their findings. Similar to the postwar period the SIL made arguments about overcrowding and the lack of recreational space for West Side youth but in the postwar period, the SIL also argued about the safety of “temporary frame rooms” which they called “firetraps.”<sup>75</sup> In a 1947 fire inspection report

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<sup>73</sup> Escobar to Allison, December 29, 1947, Folder 4, Box 3, Escobar Papers.

<sup>74</sup> Escobar Radio Address, KCOR, January 26, 1948, Folder 6, Box 5, Escobar Papers. Emphasis original.

<sup>75</sup> SIL to SAISD, November 12, 1948, Scrapbook, Escobar Papers.

conducted by the city, the inspectors concluded that the overcrowded and haphazard nature by which some of the West Side frame structures were built represented a serious fire hazard and recommended that, “all frame buildings be separated by 40 feet.” At the end of the report the inspectors went further to say that, “all ‘So Called’ Temporary Frame Constructed Buildings be replaced with fire-proof construction.”<sup>76</sup> The report proved unfortunately prescient within the San Antonio community as one school on the West Side caught fire three times in three years by 1948.<sup>77</sup>

The SIL’s efforts at publicizing the plight of schools in the *barrio* during the immediate postwar period, combined with the media reporting on the “firetrap” scandal, helped to spur the creation of one new school building for children on the West Side. The construction of the new structure provided twelve classrooms but did little to alleviate the dangerous and overcrowded conditions on the West Side. Escobar estimated that the West Side required at least six new elementary schools to adequately cover the estimated 1700 children who did not have access to a neighborhood school.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the addition of one school did little to mitigate the dangerous conditions in “firetraps” that dotted the West Side landscape. The SAISD, once again, provided a band-aid for a bullet wound. To add insult to injury, according to the SAISD director of research, the district would have a surplus of \$204,251 at the end of the fiscal year.<sup>79</sup> In August 1948, Escobar held mass rally to decry the malfeasance of the SAISD. Despite drawing a crowd

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<sup>76</sup> Uecker and Landry to Raymond South, “Fire Inspections of School Buildings,” November 1, 1947, Folder 3, Box 4, Escobar Papers.

<sup>77</sup> García, 79.

<sup>78</sup> Escobar to Portwood, February 6, 1948, Folder 5, Box 3, Escobar Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Shea to Escobar, May 19, 1948, Folder 5, Box 3, Escobar Papers.

of three thousand, the SAISD continued to make the health, welfare, and education of ethnic Mexicans a low priority.



*Figure 2.2: Picture of Crowd Gathered at August Meeting of Student Improvement League, August 1948.*<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> “Gran Junta de la Liga Pro-Defensa Escolar,” August 1948, Box 28, Folder 3, Escobar Papers.



*Figure 2.3: Eleuterio Escobar Speaking to West Side Residents at a Rally in August 1948.<sup>81</sup>*

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<sup>81</sup> “Eleuterio Escobar Speaking to West Side Residents at a Rally,” August, 1948, Box 28, Folder 3, Escobar Papers.

In 1950, the SAISD held a monumental bond election, which gave the SIL reason to hope more education dollars would flow into the West Side *barrio*. The announcement of the \$9,500,000 bond issue created impassioned debates at school board meetings leading up to the vote in June. President of the Taxpayers' League, Henry Lee Taylor, demanded to know where SAISD would gather the funds. "We don't want to oppose the school board's wishes," Taylor stated, "but we are Scotch enough to get out paper and pencil to figure out where the money is coming from."<sup>82</sup> Richard Sanchez, representing the SIL, argued, that the West Side needed three new elementary schools because some had between thirty and fifty students per classroom.<sup>83</sup> In a thinly veiled racist remark to his critics, school board chairman, Harry Rogers said, "You people who have such big criticism . . . had better get out and vote for an adequate bond issue" because "[w]e can't keep building schools for transients who go to school only three months out of the nine."<sup>84</sup> Roger's obvious hostility to Mexican Americans did not bode well for Escobar's hopes for receiving a substantial portion of the bond money for West Side schools.

The SIL ultimately decided not to directly support the bond issue because Escobar and his supporters could not gain specific concessions from Rogers about specific funding projects. Escobar chose the middle ground, while not actively supporting the bond measure, he did not reject it either; he understood that SAISD had to make at least some improvements on the West Side.<sup>85</sup> Some improvement, after all, was better than none at all. Ultimately the bond measure passed, and modest reforms made it to the West Side such as the creation of a new school in

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<sup>82</sup> *San Antonio Express*, May 23, 1950.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *San Antonio Evening News*, June 16, 1950.

place of Zavala Elementary.<sup>86</sup> Over the next few weeks, predictably, various groups lobbied their cause in front of the school board. Especially salient for the purposes is to note the two most vocal groups advocating projects for their respective communities: the SIL for the West Side and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for the East Side. O.E. Fitzgerald read a petition prepared by local the local NAACP chapter: “The board of education is here petitioned to make specific allocations of the funds . . . so as to remedy the existing emergencies and inequalities in buildings, facilities, playgrounds and other tangible property necessary to provide adequate educational opportunities for all the children in San Antonio.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *San Antonio Light*, June 20, 1950.

<sup>87</sup> *San Antonio Express*, June 15, 1950.

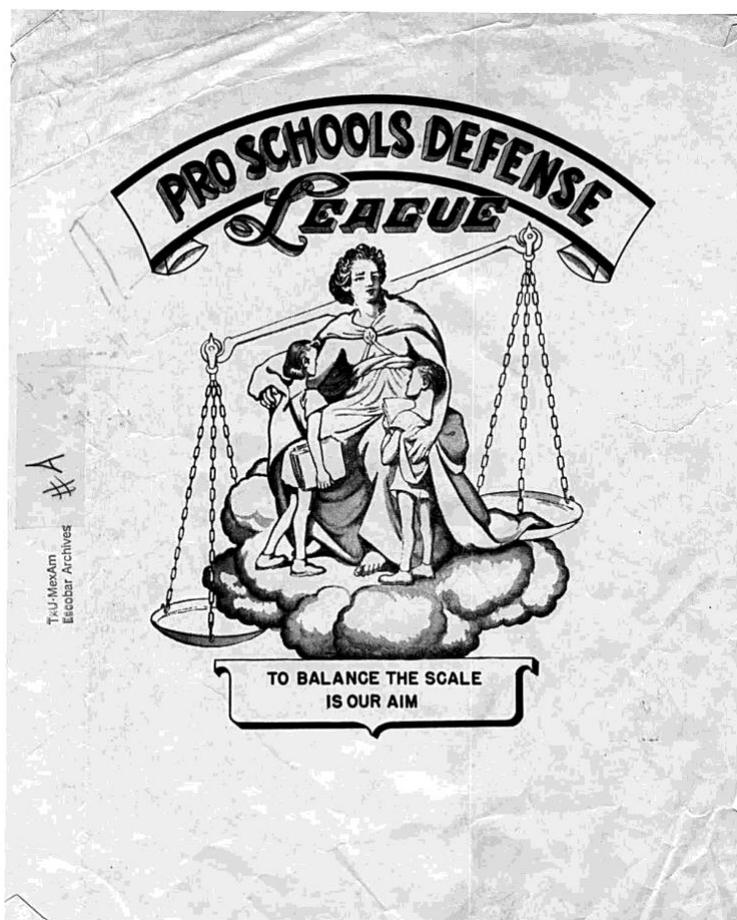


Figure 2.4: Pro Schools Defense League's Motto: To Balance the Scale is Our Aim.<sup>88</sup>

In Figure 2.4, Lady Liberty sits on the scales of Justice with two children wrapped in her arms in a protective posture. This image perfectly encapsulates SIL's mission from its inception until it fades from the historical record. Escobar did not demand much, he simply wanted to “balance the scales” so that West Side children had access to equal opportunity. Escobar died in 1970 without fully realizing his ultimate dream. By that time, the patterns of segregation on the West Side had hardened and educational equality remained a noble dream for many *mexicanos* on the West Side; however, another generation would take up Escobar's fight and make it their

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<sup>88</sup> “Pro Schools Defense League's Motto: To Balance the Scale is Our Aim,” Brochure, Box 28, Folder 3, Escobar Papers.

own. But Escobar's struggle for educational equality for *mexicanos* on the West Side is also important because it illustrates how middle-class organizations such as LULAC and the SIL envisioned the battle for progress would ensue. Escobar's strategy was one of persistence as much as resistance. The SIL picked educational equality as their focus because they saw education as the pathway to success for Mexican Americans in San Antonio. In the process, they helped create community. The two rallies that Escobar held garnered thousands of supporters all demanding equal education for West Side youth. Emma Tenayuca would take a different approach.

#### **2.4 Emma Tenayuca: Creating Community through Labor Organizing and Protest**

Working class *mexicanos* moved to San Antonio's West Side in large numbers during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Part of this immigration stemmed from San Antonio's location and its reputation as a recruiting hub for agricultural labor, which was in high demand, during World War I.<sup>89</sup> Immigration to San Antonio continued throughout the interwar period as well as during World War II. Ethnic Mexicans moved into San Antonio at a rapid rate. See Figure 2-5 below.

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<sup>89</sup> T.N. Picnot, "An Economic and Industrial Survey of San Antonio, Texas," September 1, 1942. University of Texas at San Antonio, John Peace Library Special Collections, p. 33.

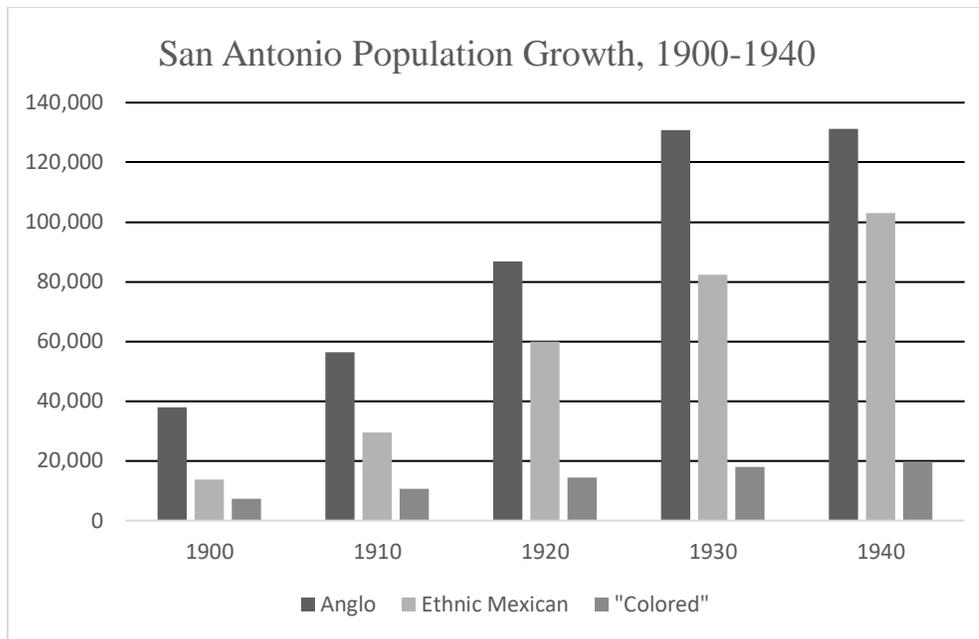


Table 2.1: San Antonio Population Growth, 1900-1940.<sup>90</sup>

Many of these newer arrivals worked in the agricultural fields surrounding San Antonio, or they journeyed to far off places like Michigan, Wisconsin, Colorado, or Idaho following the migrant labor trail. Many of these itinerant workers called San Antonio their home although they only wintered in the city. Not all working class ethnic Mexicans worked in the fields. San Antonio had a light industry sector and did a brisk business in the stockyards. In addition, the military establishment provided well-paying civil service jobs for the *mexicano* community, especially in the post-World War II years. The tourism industry also became a prominent

<sup>90</sup> T.N. Picnot, "An Economic and Industrial Survey of San Antonio, Texas," September 1, 1942. University of Texas at San Antonio, John Peace Library Special Collections, p. 167. Note: "Colored" included small numbers of ethnic/racial minorities other than African American. For 1940, the author breakdown the "colored" category this way: Negro – 19,235; Chinese – 471; Japanese – 47; Indians – 40; Miscellaneous – 39.

Census data for ethnic Mexicans is notoriously unreliable prior to 1980 because the state classified ethnic Mexicans as white except for the 1930 census, when the state briefly created a "Mexican" in "Other race" category. For a pithy discussion of the history of Latinos/as and the U.S. Census, see Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5-7.

economic driver in the postwar years as well.

Many working-class *mexicanos* growing up in San Antonio spent at least some time working in the cotton fields that surrounded San Antonio's hinterland. It became a central space for agricultural recruitment for greater Texas and the north. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, San Antonio's working-class ethnic Mexicans would serve as a cheap labor pool from which to pick. Joe Bernal, a future Texas state senator, came of age on the West Side during the Depression. He came from a large family—he had eight siblings. His father, Jose, worked as a brakeman for the railroad and his mother, Antonia, was a homemaker. Bernal's family was never wealthy, but he remembered his father, known as Chemita, as a “good provider” but he could “never catch up.”<sup>91</sup> Like many on the West Side, Bernal's family struggled but Chemita found joy in sport. He played semi-professional baseball for a local club, *Los Aztecas*. Among his peers in *Los Aztecas*, Chemita was known as a “long ball hitter” who had the respect of his family.<sup>92</sup> Bernal's father sustained an injury after a fall at some point during Bernal's youth. His family did not have the money for a doctor. Chemita's condition deteriorated, especially after he contracted tuberculosis. Bernal was twelve years old when his father died in 1939.<sup>93</sup>

The death of Bernal's father meant that the brothers had to step up to help their mother with bills. Bernal had many odd jobs around the city. He recalled his experience working the cotton fields surrounding San Antonio. Taking up an offer from a neighbor who suggested they

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<sup>91</sup> Joe Bernal, interview by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016. Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/>. Hereinafter cited CRBB interview.

<sup>92</sup> Joe Bernal, interviewed by José Angel Gutiérrez, April 17, 2003, Tejano Voices, University of Texas at Arlington, [http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS\\_169.xml](http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_169.xml). Hereinafter cited Tejano Voices interview.

<sup>93</sup> Joe Bernal, June 2016, CRBB interview; April 17, 2003, Tejano Voices interview.

work in the fields, Bernal and a couple of his brothers woke up early one morning before dawn. They piled into their neighbor's car and drove to a nearby farm to harvest the cotton crop. They started early because of the blistering South Texas sun. At four in the morning, "it was real nice and cool," but eventually the sun "beats the hell out of you." Unrelenting and oppressive heat. "It got hotter and hotter," Bernal recalled. Indeed, one of the most frequent recollections that people I interviewed had about their cotton-picking experiences revolved around the heat. The work was difficult too, but the heat made it nearly unbearable. Bernal's experience in the fields was limited. He found odd jobs around the West Side, but other families were not as fortunate. For many working-class families, working in the fields either during the summer months in Texas or following the harvest throughout the year was normal. For example, Gonzalo Barrientos, from Bastrop, Texas, recalled that he and his sisters traveled to central Texas to pick cotton with his family; however, during the fall they would return to Bastrop so that they could attend school. Indeed, some of Barrientos's earliest memories was "riding on the back of [his father's] cotton sack" when he was young.<sup>94</sup>

In Texas, cotton farm workers earned money by the weight of their daily harvest. Each day they would start with a large, cotton empty sack. At the end of the day, farmers would weigh individual sacks and pay the workers per pound of cotton. Cotton picking was some of the least desirable work in Texas because of the low pay, the heat, and the labor-intensive nature of the work. Workers draped the cotton sacks over their shoulders, or dragged it behind them, as they moved down the long rows of cotton stopping to pick the prickly cotton bolls from the plant. The sacks used were quite large and, in the case of children, it was not uncommon for the sack to be

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<sup>94</sup> Gonzalo Barrientos, interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB interview.

larger than the child carrying it. Rebecca Flores, a long-time labor organizer in Texas, described the process as a family affair. Her parents were small farmers in Atascosa County which is the county adjacent to Bexar County of which San Antonio is its seat. Unable to make living as a farmer, the Flores family became migrant farm workers. During the summer months, as a family, they traveled around Texas to harvest cotton crops in places such as Mathis, Texas which is Southeast of San Antonio. Unlike Bernal's family, however, the Flores family traveled to Wisconsin for one season to pick the cherry and onion crop.<sup>95</sup>

Also, unlike Bernal's family, the entire Flores family worked in the fields. She recalled that the migrant camps in Mathis, Texas, were "horrible." The house in which they stayed had a hole in the roof, no running water, only a portable stove, and they slept on cotton sacks in the evening. Gonzalo Barrientos recalled staying in a chicken coop one summer. His mother had to clean out all the excrement left from the chickens and made makeshift "carpeting" out of burlap sacks so that the family did not have to sleep in the dirt.<sup>96</sup> In any event, the Flores family did not spend much time in their accommodations since most of the time was spent in the fields working—from sunup to sundown. For lunch, Flores recalled eating straight from the can when they were in the fields. Among her staples were sardines, beans, corn, and Vienna sausages—anything that could be easily packed, opened, and eaten in the fields. Time was money. All the agricultural workers shared a communal tin cup to drink water from the truck that went around.

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<sup>95</sup> Rebecca Flores interview, interviewed by Vinicio Sintá and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB Interview. It is important to note that Rebecca Flores is not of the same generation as Bernal. He came of age during the Great Depression whereas Flores was a baby boomer. Roughly the same age when they both started working in the fields, her experiences come from the postwar period, but the work that they did and the experience in the fields is the important point here.

<sup>96</sup> Barrientos, June 2016, CRBB interview.

Like many *mexicanas*, her mother not only had to work in the fields all day but was also responsible for taking care of the family's needs. She cooked, cleaned, and made makeshift bonnets that they all would wear to help keep the sun off their neck and head. Everyone wore long sleeves to keep the sun at bay; it did little to protect them from the humidity.

Aside from the oppressive Texas heat, the most vivid memories my subjects had of cotton picking had to do with the burrs on the cotton bolls. When separating the actual cotton from the rest of the plant, the burrs cut into the flesh of the workers. This was especially true during the hot, dry months. If the farmer did not provide his workers gloves, or if the family could not afford to purchase gloves for the entire family, they suffered the double agony of the Texas sun and the dastardly plant that cut up their skin. At the end of the day, when their cotton sacks were weighed, and they were paid, they would give it all to their parents. In my interviews with former agricultural workers, the strongest memories most subjects had was the Texas heat which could easily top 100 degrees with high humidity in the summer and the sharp burrs on the cotton bolls that would cut into the flesh.

Part of the reason entire families worked in Texas cotton fields is that it paid so little. Wages tended to fluctuate depending on many factors including the price of cotton and where one worked and it could fluctuate between \$.50 to \$1.50 per 100 pounds.<sup>97</sup> But, it could also be a lot less. One report found that the average wage for cotton pickers in Texas was \$.50 but also found that "rates of 40 cents or less [per 100 pounds] were reported" with an average daily haul of around 140 pounds per adult.<sup>98</sup> Congress received reports adult male *mexicano* farm workers

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<sup>97</sup> Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>98</sup> Selden C. Menefee, *Mexican Migratory Workers of South Texas*, Works Progress Administration, Social

averaging a dollar per day in Texas, while women and children could expect to receive less.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, *mexicanos* working in the cotton fields of Texas earned less than African Americans cotton pickers in many areas of the South.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, a large part of the reason that ethnic Mexicans migrated to the sugar beet fields or factories of Michigan was that the pay tended to be much better. Migrant farm workers who made San Antonio their home, usually only spent the winter months in Texas. One report found that even those on the migrant trail who picked cotton outside of Texas made substantially more money than they would earn in Texas. One could expect to earn \$158.45 outside of Texas versus \$53.08 picking cotton in the state. Even seasonal work in either the beet fields or cotton fields outside of Texas meant more money.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps more important than money for many of the migrant workers, especially those that found industrial jobs, working outside of the Texas farm economy gave them a sense of pride and dignity stolen from them by the level of oppression many faced in Texas. One worker argued that in the North you could “talk with your hat on” meaning in the North, one was not required to doff their hat in subservience when speaking to an Anglo as would have been the case in many places in Texas.<sup>102</sup>

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Research Section, (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), p. 27. University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections. Hereafter cited as *Mexican Migratory Workers*.

<sup>99</sup> Roy Garis, “Mexican Immigration,” Report to Congress, p. 629. “Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere,” *Hearings Before The Committee on Immigration and Naturalization House of Representatives*, March 14, 1930.

<sup>100</sup> Selden C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassmore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor*, Works Progress Administration, Social Research Section, (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), p. 28. University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections. Hereafter cited as *Pecan Shellers of San Antonio*.

<sup>101</sup> T.N. Picnot, “An Economic and Industrial Survey of San Antonio, Texas,” September 1, 1942, pp. 16-17. University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections.

<sup>102</sup> As quoted in Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletariat of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and*

In any event, San Antonio was the main transition point for migrant farm workers heading to the beet fields up north, the cotton fields in West Texas, or to the citrus fields in California.<sup>103</sup> Jesús Garcia's story was probably typical of the sojourner who made a pit stop in San Antonio before moving on. As a small child in Aguascalientes, Garcia dreamed of seeing the world. He lived in a strict household but did not want to stay in his small town forever. When he turned twenty years old and had saved enough money, twenty-four dollars, Garcia made the trip north. He paid the head-tax of eight dollars at the border and made his way to San Antonio. He found work with the railroad which brought him to Dallas. From there he worked in a restaurant because the railroad work did not suit him. Through word of mouth, he heard that all the best jobs were out in California, so he had ambitions to move to Los Angeles as soon as possible. His stay in the United States changed him. "I found everything changed and dull [in Aguascalientes], in other words, different from [the United States], and now I like it better here and if I were to go back to Mexico it is only to visit."<sup>104</sup> Garcia was young and in search of adventure. He wanted to explore the world and the United States' growing need for labor helped provide him an opportunity for that growth.

Other cotton pickers who followed the cotton crop and wintered in San Antonio for the off-season found hardship when competing with the abundant labor supply. Individuals studying the Texas agricultural economy for the WPA interviewed Manuel Juarez in San Antonio

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*the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 18.

<sup>103</sup> George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 66.

<sup>104</sup> Jesús Garcia, interviewed by Manuel Gamio in *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 14-21.

sometime in 1938. He was a widower with six children. During the winter months he worked at a pecan shelling factory like many migrant farm workers, then in the late spring he would pack up his children and follow the Texas cotton crop. The first stop would usually be the coastal bend area sometime between May and July. The latter was the height of the picking season while people that went earlier in late Spring seemed to gamble as they relied on rumors of supposedly good harvests or perhaps to beat the competition. By August the cotton crop in central Texas—the environs surrounding San Antonio—and stayed into the fall. From there they would either return to San Antonio in the late fall or head to North and West Texas for the cotton crop.<sup>105</sup>

The Juarez family decided to try their luck on a rumor of a good harvest and headed south towards Corpus Christi in May. Unfortunately, they found a poor harvest with plenty of competition for work. In the forty-five days, they stayed in the coastal bend area, they only got three days of work for a total of \$10. Distraught, the family packed up their Model-T and headed out to West Texas for better prospects—an eight-day, 650-mile trip. In a town called Lamesa, south of Lubbock, they stayed for sixty-five days and earned a total of \$18. Fortunately, the Juarez family traveled with other migratory workers on the trail and pooled their resources to survive a particularly nasty season. Cutting their losses, the Juarez family left for San Antonio in October. Mr. Juarez had to borrow money for gas which did not even get him all the way to San Antonio. Out of gas and out of luck, Juarez called a friend to tow him the fifteen miles left to San Antonio where he sold his Model T for \$5 and \$5 in groceries. He rented a room for his family and anxiously awaited the pecan shelling season.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Pecan Shellers of San Antonio*, 26-28.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 26-28.

The Juarez story was perhaps not typical of the journey of every migrant family; he seemed to have particularly bad luck in the 1938 season. However, it is indicative of the capricious nature of the migratory trail. Not only did workers get paid pennies on the dollar but they had to compete with thousands of other farm workers looking for the same type of jobs. Much of the power rested with the farmers and they had law enforcement on their side to ensure compliance. This does not mean that migrant farm workers were powerless. Farm workers often voted with their feet if they felt conditions were unsafe, unsanitary, or simply bad working conditions. But, for the most part, migratory workers were at the mercy of their employers who had enormous power to set wages and conditions for a marginalized class of people.

Some families decided to establish roots and make San Antonio their home. It was one of the most well-known and largest *mexicano* communities in the United States. Even farm workers who followed the migrant trail often wintered in San Antonio. The harvesting season usually dropped off in the late fall and did not pick up again until the spring. This layoff period put economic pressure on migrant workers since most could not afford to simply take several months off as they waited for a new harvest. One of San Antonio's largest industries in the 1930s was pecans and pecan shelling.

San Antonio housed one of the nation's largest pecan shelling operations, The Southern Pecan Shelling Company run by Julius Seligmann—the “Pecan King.”<sup>107</sup> At one point, The Southern Pecan Shelling Company handled up to a third of the nation's total pecan market creating a near monopoly.<sup>108</sup> This meant that Seligmann could effectively set the wholesale price

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<sup>107</sup> “Sabinal May Get Shelling Plant,” *San Antonio Light*, February 10, 1938.

<sup>108</sup> *Pecan Shellers of San Antonio*, 8.

of his pecans where he wanted. To maximize profit, Seligmann paid his workers less, especially *mexicanas*. Labor organizer, Emma Tenayuca put it bluntly, Seligmann relocated his operations to San Antonio because of the widespread cheap labor supply located in San Antonio.<sup>109</sup> Ethnic Mexicans, especially *mexicanas*, were caught between a rock and a hard place. While they wintered in San Antonio between the harvest seasons, and for the working-class people who lived in San Antonio year-round during the Depression, there was few other opportunities, “they had to go into the factories and work.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, despite the deplorable condition and low wages, many *mexicanos* had little choice than to work in the pecan shelling factories.

Seligmann contracted out the actual shelling to individuals who operated “plants” with between forty to fifty people working in cramped conditions with poor ventilation; some of these “plants” had up to 100 people sitting next to one another along long wooden benches hunched over pecans.<sup>111</sup> See Figure 2.5. Part of what made pecan shelling difficult was that the workers, seated on a plain wooden bench without lumbar support, hunched over tables overflowing with pecans for hours at a time. Some factories lacked proper ventilation which meant that dust and debris would permeate the air in a confined space crowded with people. The dust often got into people’s lungs creating miserable working conditions.

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<sup>109</sup> Emma Tenayuca interview, Interviewed by Luis R. Torres, February 1987, José Angel Gutiérrez papers, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collection, MS 24, Box 31.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> *Pecan Shellers*, 9; Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 22.



Figure 2.5: Workers Separating Pecan Meat from Shell.<sup>112</sup>

While dozens of these factories operated on the West Side of San Antonio at any given time during the winter months, Tenayuca estimated that most of these smaller factories operated seasonally while one or two larger ones stayed open year-round.<sup>113</sup> This makes sense because, for most migrant workers, pecan shelling was a stopgap measure used to bridge their incomes between harvests. For those who stayed in San Antonio permanently, the larger factories would

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<sup>112</sup> Lee, Russell, photographer. *Mexican pecan shellers removing nuts from shells, non-union plant. San Antonio, Texas.* Bexar County San Antonio Texas United States, 1939. Mar. Photograph. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017782686/>.

<sup>113</sup> Emma Tenayuca interview, Interviewed by Luis R. Torres, February 1987, José Angel Gutiérrez papers, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collection, MS 24, Box 31.

likely meet their needs in terms of work. See Figure 2.6



Figure 2.6: Pecan Shelling Shack with Pecan Meat Drying in the Yard.<sup>114</sup>

In this image, pecans rested on makeshift slabs in the front yard among a group of houses that were typical of the housing for *mexicanos* during the Depression-era San Antonio. There was little separation between work and home life for the people that did piecework in these ad-hoc shops located next door to their own dwellings. While perhaps this made work accessible for people inside the *barrio*, it also meant that they had little space away from the gaze of their

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<sup>114</sup> Russell Lee, photographer, *Typical Mexican housing with pecan meats drying in yard, San Antonio, Texas*. San Antonio Texas United States, 1939. Mar. Photograph. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017739301/>.

employers. During the Depression era when Seligmann operated at the height of his power as the Pecan King of Texas, through his contractors he could effectively hold his labor force hostage because there were few options for working-class *mexicanos* looking for work.

The pecan-shelling process began with Seligmann delivering the raw pecans to local contractors. From there the workers immersed the pecans in water for a soak and a twenty-four-hour drying period. From there, “crackers”—officially unskilled labor, but a process that required skill to operate the manual pecan press—used a vice-like machine to crack the whole pecan whereby pickers would separate the pecan meat from the shell. Whole pecan meat paid more per one hundred pounds than did damaged pecan meat. For example, in one factory, Seligman’s contractors paid crackers \$.40 per 100 pounds of pecans. Damaged meat garnered less. Prior to the Depression, when pecan prices and wages dropped precipitously, pecan workers could expect to take home \$10-12 weekly. During the Depression that went to \$2.50 per week without hourly labor restrictions.<sup>115</sup> Because Seligmann controlled so much of the nation’s pecan crop, he could artificially set the price where he wanted it. Indeed, prior to him getting into the pecan market, pecan shelling had been mechanized to an extent—almost every part of the process minus the picking of the pecan meat from the shell and the packaging had been mechanized. To cut costs, Seligman purposely hired *mexicano* laborers which kept the labor costs artificially low and got rid of the machines. This meant that other major pecan suppliers also had to get rid of machines because they could not compete with Seligmann.<sup>116</sup> In other

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<sup>115</sup> Texas Civil Liberties Union, *San Antonio: The Cradle of Texas Liberty and its Coffin?* (Austin: Texas Civil Liberties Union, 1938), pp. 3-4. University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections. Hereinafter *Cradle of Texas Liberty*.

<sup>116</sup> *Pecan Shellers*, 7-8.

words, Seligmann cornered the pecan market and used cheap, unskilled ethnic to maximize his profit.

The wages and hours for pecan shelling varied widely. According to one pro-labor report, pecan workers were lucky if they made \$10.00 per week in what they called Seligman's "monopoly and misery."<sup>117</sup> One federal investigation found that some pecan shellers took home only \$1.29 per week for nearly thirty-five hours of work.<sup>118</sup> The hour's pecan shellers work varied incredibly. Some people worked from five in the morning to ten in the evening. In 1938, pecan shellers only earned \$251 for a family of four, which included wages and the value of any relief that the family received according to a WPA report on pecan shellers' conditions in San Antonio. The report also concluded that "incomes on this extremely low level can only result in suffering, malnutrition, disease, and high death rates."<sup>119</sup>

The ubiquity of the pecan processing plants meant that West Side residents had access to employment within the four-mile square radius of the *barrio*. The proximity to home likely drew *mexicanas* to pecan shelling work in large numbers as pecan shelling and women went the Depression era. They could bring their children to work with them to keep an eye out while earning extra money for the family income much like the workday setup that was typical for families who worked in the fields. This meant that women could translate their labor into wages to contribute to the overall family economy, yet they also had the flexibility to return home to take care of the domestic duties as well. However, the proximity and abundance of cheap,

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<sup>117</sup> *Cradle of Texas Liberty*, 3.

<sup>118</sup> *Pecan Shellers*, 13.

<sup>119</sup> *Pecan Shellers*, 24-25. The report also found that when pecan shelling was the sole source of income, a family of four could expect to take home a paltry \$191 in 1938.

unskilled labor meant that the pecan shellers did not have the leverage to sue for higher wages or better working conditions. Moreover, because pecan shelling did not provide a living wage, working-class women had to work and take care of the domestic duties in the home. Labor organizer Manuela Solis Sanger lamented that women did “all the washing, ironing, and all the things [but] they didn’t get paid for nothing.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, it was a double-edged sword for women working in the pecan shelling factories because, like many working-class women, societal and cultural expectations meant in addition to working for wages, they also had to cook, clean, and take care of the children—work that never really ended. In addition, during the successful Pecan Shellers strike in 1938, women such as Tenayuca and Manuela Solis Sanger organized the striking workforce. *Mexicanas* did almost everything but received little of the credit.

While agricultural work was not the only work available for ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio, such work did represent the reality for many working-class ethnic Mexicans and would continue to be a theme throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the Depression, *mexicanos* had limited options. When city leaders thought about the ethnic Mexican community, they did so in crass political terms—especially as they thought about developing the city: ethnic Mexican labor built contemporary San Antonio and they would exploit that labor—and cultural heritage—to the full advantage of North Side interests. In the 1930s, Seligmann was perhaps the epitome of this kind of blatant capitalist exploitation of *mexicano* bodies for profit, but he would not be the only one, but the community would not take it lying down.

The 1938 Pecan Shellers strike was an important moment in helping to establish a

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<sup>120</sup> Manuela Solis Sager, Interviewed by Dedra McDonald, Phyllis McKenzie, and Sara Massie, 1992, University of Texas at San Antonio: Institute of Texan Cultures: Oral History Collection, UA 15.01.12, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

working-class identity among ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio as well as facilitate community building, because to be successful, the *barrio* had to come together to support the striking workers. As indicated, pecan shelling was difficult work for low pay. Most of the pecan shellers were *mexicana* contractors which meant the possibility for exploitation was high. This is especially true for such a seasonal crop like pecans because migrant workers came back to San Antonio during a lull and used pecan shelling to get through the winter months. In addition to the low pay, the conditions were terrible for the workers. This made pecan shellers amenable to organization. They simply needed a skilled organizer. Labor organizing had never been easy, certainly not in Texas, and certainly not during the Depression. As Jaime Martinez, a local civil rights leader and labor organizer once put it, “it’s difficult to organize. When they handcuff you, they arrest you, they try to kill you, but you still keep on fighting.” Martinez understood that a good organizer had to be honest and prepare workers for the tough road ahead. One cannot go into a workplace and say, “sign our union card and we’re going to win.” It required effort, tenacity, determination, compassion, and perseverance.<sup>121</sup> Luckily for the pecan shellers, they had communist firebrand, Emma Tenayuca.

Emma Tenayuca was born and bred on the West Side of San Antonio in 1916. She was one of eleven children. Her informal education into the realm on politics and labor organizing began with her grandparents who always talked about politics in San Antonio. Moreover,

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<sup>121</sup> Jaime Martinez interview, Interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB interview. Martinez did not participate in the Pecan Shellers strike as he was a baby boomer, but his musings on labor organizing are relevant regardless of the era. Martinez grew up in San Antonio and rose to prominence within San Antonio’s labor community during the civil rights era. A charismatic figure, he joined the International Union of Electrical Workers in 1966, and served in various capacities for the IUE Local and national office. He would reach national recognition for his civil rights and worker advocacy. In San Antonio he was beloved. Each year he led the César Chávez March for Justice. The San Antonio City Council named a street after him in 2015; Jaime P. Martinez Place cuts through the West Side. When we sat down with Jaime in June 2016, perhaps the thing of which he was most proud was the street sign with his name on it likely because his idol, César Chávez also has a street named after him in San Antonio. Born and raised on the West Side, Jaime died on July 2017 after a protracted fight with cancer.

Tenayuca recalled that her grandfather always brought her to La Plaza del Zacate (also known as Milam Plaza) in the heart of the West Side. A vestige of the Spanish colonial rule, the plaza was a meeting place for people in the community. Some conducted business, others recruited people for work, and some held political speeches. Tenayuca explained, “it was also a place you could walk around. It’s quite . . . a large place. You could go to one corner of the plaza and listen to someone preaching or reading the Bible [or] you could go to another place and you could see a group of people, one person reading the paper to other workers – the latest news from Mexico.”<sup>122</sup> But it was also a place that one could discuss and learn about politics because San Antonio’s West Side was the heart of the ethnic Mexican community in the United States. In the post Mexican Revolution period, many radicals fled Mexico to San Antonio. Tenayuca had clear memories of *Magonistas*, anarcho-syndicalists concerned about the plight of workers on both sides of the border, speaking to the crowds on the plaza.<sup>123</sup> Thus, from a young age Emma Tenayuca was immersed in the politics, political theory, and ideology facilitated, at least in part, by open community spaces which encouraged social gathering. Plazas were integral to community development because they brought all sorts of people together into one area and exposed them to different ideas and news of the day. These spaces were especially important before the advent and widespread popularization of the radio, especially for poorer communities like San Antonio. Finally, seeing the abject poverty and despair among workers in the *barrio* during the Depression influenced Tenayuca’s worker consciousness. “People today don’t understand. People lost their homes,” Tenayuca explained. “They lost everything they had in the

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<sup>122</sup> Emma Tenayuca interview, Interviewed by Jerry Poyo, February 1987, University of Texas at San Antonio: Institute of Texan Cultures: Oral History Collection, UA 15.01.12, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>123</sup> Gabriela González, “Emma Tenayuca,” *American National Biography*, October 2007 (<http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1501312>).

banks.” The vigor and strength of this memory as related to her interviewer is forceful. One gets a direct sense that the Depression as much as anything else, or perhaps because of her political education, meant that she had a visceral reaction to the Depression and the failure of capitalism in its wake.<sup>124</sup>

While the plazas fed Tenayuca’s political education, praxis occurred on the front lines of the labor movement in San Antonio. Tenayuca first participated in the Finck Cigar strike in 1933. A woman by the name of W. H. Ernst organized the strike for better working conditions, complaints about stolen wages, and general worker harassment amid threats of deportation by management.<sup>125</sup> For her efforts, Tenayuca was arrested but she had found her calling. Her next effort in the labor movement came the following year when she helped organize garment workers against Dorothy Frocks, a children’s clothing manufacturer. Both strikes ultimately failed to achieve their goals but Tenayuca earned a reputation for herself as “the little girl who confronts men.”<sup>126</sup> She also learned how to organize and how difficult the process could be.

Tenayuca really cut her teeth in labor organizing after she began working with the Worker’s Alliance of America (WAA). The WAA was a socialist led, multifaceted organization that represented Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers. After 1935, the incorporated

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<sup>124</sup> Emma Tenayuca interview, interviewed by Jerry Poyo, February 1987, University of Texas at San Antonio: Institute of Texan Cultures: Oral History Collection, UA 15.01.12, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections; Emma Tenayuca interview, interviewed by Luis R. Torres, 1987-1988, MS 24, Box 31, José Angel Gutiérrez Papers, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries (<https://medialibrary.utsa.edu/Play/9046>).

<sup>125</sup> *San Antonio Light*, December 2, 1935.

<sup>126</sup> Emma Tenayuca, as quoted in Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 128.

Much of the background biography on Tenayuca is informed by my reading of Vargas, *Labor Rights* as well as Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

Communist Unemployed Councils joined the WAA.<sup>127</sup> The inclusion of the communist Unemployed Councils was especially important for San Antonio's worker alliance councils. At the local level, Tenayuca represented the communist Westside Unemployment Council in 1935. After the Unemployment Councils merged with the WAA, Emma Tenayuca emerged as a leader in the WAA. "The Workers Alliance organized the unemployed," Tenayuca explained. "It did a tremendous job. . . we had a branch here [in San Antonio]; I think we had more than 10,000 workers." Indeed, WPA workers built many of the iconic buildings that remain popular in San Antonio to this day.

Tenayuca tirelessly advocated for higher wages for WPA workers, especially for Mexican American WPA workers whose wages tended to be much lower than Anglos, especially for Latinas.<sup>128</sup> For example, the Workers Alliance organized one march of two thousand strong from Milam Park (La Plaza del Zacate on the West Side) towards city hall to confront Mayor Quin. Ethnic Mexicans, especially women and with their children in tow, carried signs that read: "We don't want charity—appropriate money from taxes we have paid!"; "Raise the WPA quota—Raise WPA wages 20 per cent!"; and "We demand trade union wages for WPA jobs."<sup>129</sup> This amazing show of solidarity highlights numerous things. First, reports found that over 90% of the demonstrators appeared to be ethnic Mexican. Indeed, they began their march on the plaza where years earlier Tenayuca would go to hear Magonistas preach about worker solidarity. That they began their march at Milam Park was no accident. Tenayuca understood the power of place and its ability to attract the attention of West Side residents. One could imagine her speaking to

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<sup>127</sup> Chad Alan Goldberg, "Haunted by the Specter of Communism: Collective Identity and Resource Mobilization in the Demise of the Workers Alliance of America," *Theory and Society*, 32 (2003), p. 730.

<sup>128</sup> Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 130.

<sup>129</sup> *San Antonio Light*, March 8, 1937.

the crowd to get them energized about the march as dozens upon dozens of people spontaneously joined along the way.

It also highlights the degree to which *mexicanas* were at the forefront of the organizing in San Antonio during the Depression. While Tenayuca is the most prominent figure to emerge from this period of union activity, she certainly was not alone in her activism. Mothers and fathers brought their children along in these marches demanding they be treated as first class citizens. This type of community engagement, especially for young children who wore WAA uniform: blue caps with the letters WAA stitched or stenciled on as they carried signs and marched alongside their parents, would have lasting implications for future generations of activists.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, Tenayuca's own politicization speaks to the power of early involvement and exposure to civil rights activism and union organizing.

Unfortunately, not every WAA march was that peaceful. In the summer of 1937, the WAA came into continued and sustained conflict with Mayor Quin and the San Antonio police department. Tensions between Quin and the WAA grew after Quin's administration refused to give the WAA a permit for a May Day parade. In late April, Quin ordered his motorcycle police to surveil the WAA headquarters "for possible trouble in connection with the [permit] refusal" because members of the WAA had staged a sit-down strike in his office earlier that week.<sup>131</sup> In response, Tenayuca declared that the WAA May Day celebration would be housed at San Pedro Park rather than march, again, on City Hall. The WAA sponsored event was expected to host upwards of 12,000-16,000 people with guests from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and

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<sup>130</sup> *San Antonio Light*, March 8, 1937.

<sup>131</sup> *San Antonio Light*, April 28, 1937; *San Antonio Light*, May 1, 1937.

the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO) in attendance.<sup>132</sup>

Relations between Quin and the WAA deteriorated from there culminating in a police raid on the WAA headquarters in late June. Quin stated that the raid was in response to another WAA sit-down strike in the WPA offices. The several hundred WAA members protest was in response to national cutbacks in the WPA rolls. Among the handful arrested at the WPA sit-down protest was Emma Tenayuca. Shortly after the arrests were made, a group of San Antonio police officers took it upon their own initiative to teach the WAA a lesson. Unprovoked, they descended upon the WAA headquarters and “clubbed everyone within reach” but, the report added, they were “careful not to hit anyone on the head.” The raid created mass panic with people running in every direction. After the police had cleared the building of WAA members, they set about to “systematically destroy everything in the place. Banners, flags, pictures . . . benches and chairs were hammered into pieces.” Even a piano was wrecked during the unprovoked raid. The police did a thorough job of destroying the WAA headquarters.<sup>133</sup> So egregious was the raid that condemnation came from the national WAA as well as the Texas governor in Austin.<sup>134</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union called for a full investigation of the matter as well.<sup>135</sup> Locally, the raid was viewed in a positive light by some. Justice of the Peace Bat Corrigan sent a telegram to Chief of Police Owen Kilday, a local Quin supporter, stating that the police ought to receive a pay raise for their actions. He blamed the actions on the WAA members themselves and decried them as “foreign agitators.” Corrigan said, “When our citizens

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<sup>132</sup> *San Antonio Light*, May 1, 1937.

<sup>133</sup> *San Antonio Light*, June 30, 1937.

<sup>134</sup> *San Antonio Light*, September 5, 1937.

<sup>135</sup> *San Antonio Light*, July 18, 1937.

are involved in foreign disturbances, they are promptly dispatched. . . . I believe we should clear our community of un-American radicals, whom we have fed for far too long.”<sup>136</sup> Corrigan’s remarks are telling for various reasons, not the least of which because he was a public official. But the animus toward the WAA was nothing new. While sitting in her jail cell awaiting her trial, Tenayuca’s attorney appealed to Judge McCrory for a writ of habeas corpus to which the Judge replied, “She belongs in jail. Let her stay there.” He went further stating that since Tenayuca was a known communist he did not care what the police did with her.<sup>137</sup> San Antonio, and Texas in general, had a long history of using the police as a mechanism to squash dissent among ethnic Mexicans—that both a judge and justice of the peace would harbor such animus toward Tenayuca and the WAA was not surprising. Neither was the claim Corrigan made that the workers’ actions was the result of “foreign agitation.” In this context, foreign had double meaning. In the first sense, foreign implied a Russian connection because of Tenayuca’s communist connection. But, as important, and as revealing perhaps, is that Corrigan read foreignness in Tenayuca’s actions precisely because she was ethnic Mexican. Corrigan claimed that “our citizens” were caught up in “foreign disturbances” meaning no *American* citizen in their right mind would act in such a clearly *un-American* manner. During the fall of 1937 tensions between the WAA and Quin would settle down; however, they would flare up again in early 1938 when the Pecan Shellers launched their strike.

One final comment about Tenayuca and the WAA before moving on to the strike. Max Krochmal argues that although Tenayuca was a Communist, she was not ideological in her politics. This is accurate. For Tenayuca, it seems that the CPUSA and the Worker’s Alliance

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<sup>136</sup> *San Antonio Light*, July 4, 1937.

<sup>137</sup> *San Antonio Light*, June 30, 1937.

were tools she used to help working class ethnic Mexicans. This is critical. Part of the identity that developed on the West Side during the Depression era arose precisely because of the non-dogmatic approach of the Worker's Alliance. People understood that this organization, regardless of its national politics, attempted to help the working class, regardless of citizenship status. Thus, unlike LULAC, the Worker's Alliance, and unionism more broadly in San Antonio at the time, offered an acceptable communal alternative to the stodgy middle class LULAC councils. This broad-base acceptable is likely what made the Worker's Alliance so popular in San Antonio. Moreover, Tenayuca's training led her to see across national lines in terms of worker solidarity. Thus, while WAA was ostensibly a WPA union, its relationship with the defunct communist Unemployed Councils meant that, in practice, they worked for the interest of all workers regardless of citizenship status. This was another extremely important organizing tool that set the WAA apart from LULAC. The WAA helped engender a solidly working class, oppositional identity across national lines among the working class and poor in the *barrio* whereas LULAC specifically wanted to maintain their Americanness and middle-class respectability as their primary organizing tool. Both groups operated out of the West Side *barrio* but had different constituencies. Sometimes they would overlap, especially because ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio, except for the most affluent, experienced some form of discriminatory treatment which would help form another, overlapping identity—that of Westsider. Regardless of where one came from, everyone who lived on the West Side was of the *barrio* because of their shared experiences navigating the discrimination within the broader culture. And that experience knew neither class nor geographical boundaries. For example, Tenayuca argued in a paper written for *The Communist* that, much like the city police that Quin used to pacify protest, the state would also use the threat of deportation to quiet protest. This type of policing was common

along the border in the agricultural fields as the Texas Rangers and local sheriffs often operated as an extension of the grower. But the threat of deportation and the use of the Border Patrol added an extra threat that ethnic Mexicans had to navigate which made organizing difficult.<sup>138</sup> But for the working class, the WAA activism helped engender a nascent sort of working-class consciousness as well. As Robert McElvaine concluded in his study of the Great Depression, most working-class people in the Depression were not actual socialists but leaned to the left because of growing class consciousness that the Depression engendered.<sup>139</sup>

The Pecan Shellers strike did not occur in a vacuum. “The pecan sheller strike was a culmination of about four years of intensive organizing,” Emma Tenayuca emphatically declared.<sup>140</sup> Tenayuca and the WAA had spent years organizing and building trust within the community. They failed to make meaningful gains in the Fenick Cigar Factory strike and the Garment Workers Strike. Four years prior, in 1934, pecan shellers launched a smaller strike which ended in arbitration, but also failed to adequately address the chronic low wages that pecan shellers continually faced.<sup>141</sup> Through trial and error, but mostly through determination, organization, and building relationships within the community, the strike in 1938 had an opportunity to become successful.

On January 31, 1938, several thousand workers walked off the job at 7 am in response to

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<sup>138</sup> Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” *The Communist* 18, No. 3, March 1939.

<sup>139</sup> Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression* as quoted in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 8-9.

<sup>140</sup> Emma Tenayuca interview, interviewed by Luis R. Torres, MS 24, Box 31, 1987-1988, José Angel Gutiérrez Papers, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries (<https://medialibrary.utsa.edu/Play/9046>).

<sup>141</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 134.

an across the board wage cut. Seligmann had cut their meager salaries even further. “It is a known fact” that pecan shellers were not paid a wage for them to “live decency” Pablo Mesa, leader of the League of Loyal Americans said in a hearing. He continued, “they are not living, they are just existing.”<sup>142</sup> The twenty percent wage reduction meant that their already abysmal wages were now so low as to be unconscionable because workers simply could not live. The walkout forced many independent packing houses to close. Police Chief Kilday immediately mobilized 150 police in response to what the *San Antonio Light* described as “peaceful” picketing. Kilday, however, ordered that the police be armed with riot guns and tear gas, a clear overreaction and provocation. Similar to the raid on the WAA headquarters six months previous, the San Antonio police department wanted to send a clear message about who was in control. And given that Quin and Kilday faced little backlash for their actions on the WAA headquarters raid, they likely felt they could act with impunity against the striking pecan shellers. Kilday also ordered Tenayuca arrested although she initially took no active role in the strike itself and was there for “moral support.” That mattered little to Kilday who arrested her for simply being a known Communist.<sup>143</sup> Throughout the strike, Tenayuca would face blistering criticism for both being a *mexicana* and a communist; race and her personal politics often intertwined and intersected.

As a result of the strike, the struggling CIO-affiliated United Cannery, Agricultural, Packinghouse, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) Local 172 saw its membership rolls swell. In 1937, Local 172 had less than 100 members but by February 1938, it had

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<sup>142</sup> *San Antonio Light*, February 15, 1938.

<sup>143</sup> *San Antonio Light*, January 31, 1938.

thousands.<sup>144</sup> George Lambert, a socialist and representative from the Texas CIO, came into the city to “conduct a brief investigation” on what state CIO officials understood to be a mild disturbance in San Antonio.<sup>145</sup> When he got on the ground, he better understood the situation. Throughout the strike, he and Emma Tenayuca lent their support and voices to the striking pecan shellers and their allies. As noted above, the pecan shellers’ wages were some of the worst in the nation and they worked in terrible conditions. Few disputed this fact. But what George Lambert realized as he got more involved in the strike organization was that the strike began to take on a larger meaning. Westsiders unaffiliated with the pecan shelling business came to the events and lent a hand. Here is the important take away, for many West Side residents, the strike became more than just about improving the wages and working conditions for the pecan shellers, it became a referendum and a proxy battle for how the city treated *mexicanos* in the *barrio* more broadly. As Max Krochmal puts it, “the lines between the union and the community blurred, as did the divide between a simple labor conflict and the more general push for civil rights.”<sup>146</sup>

Chief Kilday’s overreaction and violence inflicted upon the picketers only served to reinforce and engender this bond between community and workers. By mid-February Kilday and Mayor Quin could no longer pretend that they did not have a serious problem on their hands. The plight of the pecan shellers gained state-wide and national attention. The Texas Industrial Commission held hearings and subpoenaed witnesses regarding the strike, especially as it related to the treatment many strikers faced from the San Antonio police department. Police indiscriminately arrested anyone carrying a picket sign as the police operated in tandem with

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<sup>144</sup> Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 22-23.

<sup>145</sup> Krochmal, 20.

<sup>146</sup> Krochmal, 24.

factory owners to help mitigate disruption to their plant operations. The testimony of one *mexicana*, Florinda Morena, was perhaps typical of the type of treatment they received. Having worked in the pecan shelling industry since she was eight years old (15 at the time of the strike), Morena decided that her labor was worth more so she toed the strike line for which she received a beating from one of Kilday's officers. She testified that the policeman "said if I stayed in the Union they would put me in the correction house."<sup>147</sup> This is an important point that Morena illustrates. Part of the reaction by the San Antonio police was about busting up the union by whatever means necessary, including violence and threats of violence.

Fellow pecan shellers Miguel and David Robles shared similar stories about being beaten and thrown in jail by police. Kilday's police officers also used tear gas regularly to disperse crowds. A stubborn Kilday testified that "no strike existed" and he would order his officers to continue to use tear gas on picket lines. Kilday told the commission, tear gas "has been used six or eight times and it [would] be used again if necessary."<sup>148</sup> This complete disregard, bordering on contempt, for both the picketers whom he called "cattle" and for the commission itself was apparent. Kilday ran his personal fiefdom in San Antonio with impunity and would continue to do as he saw fit regardless of how it appeared from the outside. The strikers were not even human in his eyes, but sheep following some sort of communistic plot led by a young Emma Tenayuca. For the police, the strike was tantamount to communist invasion by foreign agitators that had to be stopped. "Respectable" *mexicanos* understood their place within San Antonio society. They understood the racial and political hierarchy and did not make waves. Organizing

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<sup>147</sup> *San Antonio Light*, February 15, 1938; Florinda Morena correction house quote, *Cradle of Texas Liberty* (it provided coverage of the injunction hearing).

<sup>148</sup> *San Antonio Light*, February, 15, 1938.

unions and encouraging protest was a legitimate threat to City Hall's machine. The demographics of San Antonio were such that if the *barrio* organized, *mexicanos* could ostensibly challenge the political status quo. The political elite would not let that type of threat metastasize.

The strike ended in bittersweet success by March 1938. As a direct result of the strike workers "gained a closed shop, wage increases, a checkoff system, and a grievance committee." For the workers who engaged in several months of uncertainty, toeing the picket with only their faith to sustain them—and the soup kitchens provided by the community—the eventual end of the strike was likely a joyous moment. They had faced down the political machine, worked collectively, and *won*. Yet, their good cheer was short-lived as Washington passed the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in June 1938. While perhaps a net positive for labor generally, for ethnic Mexican pecan shellers, it was disastrous policy. Because the FLSA established a minimum wage, growers did not want to pay their workers at those higher levels stipulated by the government. The result was the pecan industry moved towards mechanization and displaced thousands of pecan shellers across Texas. Their plight became more difficult. Corrington Gill, assistant commissioner for the Works Project Administration, concluded in his report on the Pecan Shellers of San Antonio—a federal study published in 1940 in the wake of the strike—that mechanization and the FLSA generally meant a higher standard of living and wages for "employed" Mexicans, the net effect would likely see long-term unemployment for ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio. Moreover, Gill argued that discriminatory treatment and poverty endemic on the West Side meant that finding new jobs would be difficult. "Only widespread economic recovery can result in the elimination of unemployment among the former pecan

shellers,” Gill concluded.<sup>149</sup>

Nevertheless, the strike was an important turning point for the working-class community in San Antonio. Through the tireless efforts of labor organizers such as Emma Tenayuca and the countless others, everyday people in the community were able to affect change in their own lives in a material way. They organized, they fought, and they won. The strike showed them the power in collective action. It would be a lesson that many would transfer into other areas of their lives, especially the next generation who attended rallies and walked picket lines with their fathers, mothers, and fellow *barrio* residents. Alberta Snid, a longtime resident on the West Side, recalled her experience with the pecan shellers strike in an interview. Her mother brought a young Alberta with her to protest the injustice and to fight for higher wages. Although she did not participate herself, the strike left an indelible imprint on her mind. Speaking about the lessons learned from the strike, Alberta Snid said, “I think we learned a whole lot. I think we learned how even to defend ourselves, more. I think we forgot a little bit of the fear we had.” This is critical. Organizing with her fellow community members gave Snid and others the strength to collectively work toward a common goal despite the fears they had of the police and of Anglo society generally. For Snid, the strike was a touchstone moment not only in her life but in the lives of working people in San Antonio generally. She claimed that she felt “entirely different” after the strike. She had found her voice, as had many *mexicanas* who had previously been silenced. From the very beginning *mexicanas* had been the backbone of the labor movement in San Antonio. Snid argued, women “have always been involved in some sort of ways whether its labor [or] defending our families.” Along with her voice, Snid found strength in her community. “We learned that through organization, we could do something. Maybe we

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<sup>149</sup> *Pecan Shellers of San Antonio*, III-IV.

didn't win that much as far as moneywise is concerned, okay. But we learned that being united is power. Regardless it is power. A single person cannot do anything. Alone we cannot do anything. People are power," Snid concluded.<sup>150</sup>

People are power. This, perhaps more than anything, is the legacy of the Pecan Shellers strike of 1938. The organization surrounding the strike helped working class *mexicanos* in the *barrio* find their agency. Disfranchised by the city, both economically and politically, organizing in a union showed them that every day people had the ability to change their lives for the better. The community in which these working-class individuals helped to build offered a buffer from the world around them. Anglos in San Antonio saw working class *mexicanos* as inferior, only a source of cheap, disposable labor to work in factories and fields. City politicians and the police saw them similarly as disposable and deportable should they become too burdensome on the city's financial resources. But, acting collectively helped create the social space necessary for these working-class individuals to grow and thrive despite the limitations of divestment and poverty that surrounded them. In the process, through their lived experiences, that helped fashion an identity that was unique to the West Side. Richard Garcia has illustrated how a middle-class identity was shaped through interactions on the West Side, but a similar working-class identity was fashioned in those who experienced the daily discrimination and harassment meted out by the Anglo world around them.

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<sup>150</sup> Alberta Snid interview, *Talkin' Union* (1977), People's History in Texas Records, 1976-2005, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

**Chapter 3**  
**“The Rumped Angel of the Slums”:**  
**The Promises and Perils of Public Housing in San Antonio**

Jesuit priest and pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Father Carmelo A. Tranchese, dedicated a poem to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the spring of 1938. It read:

To Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Courageous and Prudent Man to Whom  
The Ship of the American Nation  
Which for a long time  
Had been struggling with bad oars and sails  
  
Was entrusted by the Divine Providence that  
He Might Guide and steer Her,  
The course which he has favorably  
Begun may continue  
Because of the great benefits which  
He has bestowed on San Antonio, Texas.<sup>1</sup>

Tranchese dedicated the poem to FDR in recognition of his efforts to bring public housing to San Antonio. His parish was located in the heart of San Antonio’s West Side community, and he saw firsthand how badly his parishioners needed better and more affordable housing. The ethnic Mexican population in San Antonio exploded over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. This growth, segregation, and inadequate existing housing stock put intense pressure on San Antonio’s housing market. But the conditions on the West Side ranked among the nation’s

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<sup>1</sup> Father Carmelo A. Tranchese to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, May 23, 1938, Father Carmelo A. Tranchese Papers, Microfilm Collection, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas; J. Gilberto Quesada, “Towards a Working Definition of Social Justice: Father Carmelo A. Tranchese, S.J. and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, 1932-1953,” *The Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture* 4 (1993). Hereafter cited as Tranchese Papers. Note: the original document is in the original Latin so I consulted with the Quesada translation for use here.

worst. In the late 1930s, it was not uncommon to have shared public facilities, dirt floors, and shotgun-style houses made up of scrap material.

With the passage of the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 (also known as the Wagner-Stegall Act), the promise of affordable, public housing became a reality for some communities across the nation.<sup>2</sup> Among other things, the WSA created the United States Housing Authority (USHA) which was supposed to operate as a national coordinating agency to lend money to municipal housing agencies across the nation. The bill that emerged out of Congress, however, disappointed many public housing advocates. Tying federal projects to slum clearance along with strict limits on cost per unit severely restricted the quality of public housing accommodations.<sup>3</sup> In short, the WSA simply did not go far enough, it compromised too much, and did not have the type of support in Congress that other New Deal housing programs like the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) home loan guarantee program had. As a result, the impact, vision, and implementation of the program was limited in its scope nationally and locally.

In San Antonio, the national politics surrounding the bill mattered little to Father Tranchese, a fierce advocate for public housing in the city. Throughout the 1930s, he supported his parishioners by creating soup kitchens, assisting with health clinics, and lobbying for public housing in San Antonio. Given where his church was located, his parishioners stood to gain the most if San Antonio could secure public housing in San Antonio. He lobbied locally and

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<sup>2</sup> Hereinafter cited as WSA. Note: I want to acknowledge that “slum clearance” is a highly racialized term with lots of baggage. I do not put it in quotes in my dissertation for two reasons: one, that is how my subjects understood the term, and two, for readability purposes.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 190.

nationally, inviting Eleanor Roosevelt to San Antonio to witness firsthand the conditions in which his parishioners lived. Because of his indefatigable lobbying efforts, the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA) secured one of the first public housing loans from the USHA.

In the end, however, the early public housing movement in San Antonio was a mixed bag. The problem was that the experiment was not broad enough to have a wider impact on San Antonio. Because the program was tied to slum clearance, this meant that the five public housing complexes created in San Antonio during the 1940s displaced more people than they served. The demand for housing was such that supply would ultimately never catch up with demand in large part because of the inherent limitations written into the Wagner-Steagall Act. Moreover, the program never gained much traction nationally as opponents of public housing lobbied against expansion while championing, instead, the expansion of the FHA mortgage insurance program. Walter McAllister, a local banker and future mayor of San Antonio, argued “the greatest defense against [Communism and fascism] is home ownership.”<sup>4</sup> As the principal opponent of public housing in San Antonio during its inception, he believed that public housing was antithetical to the American democratic experiment and delivered widespread rebukes of the system throughout his career as a businessman.

### **3.1 Catherine Bauer’s Radical Public Housing Policy**

Franklin D. Roosevelt came into office during the midst of the Great Depression. He entered not having one single plan to combat the economic downturn but, instead, relied heavily on advisers, academics, and progressives to help generate a bevy of plans for combatting the

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<sup>4</sup> Walter McAllister, “Home Modernization,” Speech to the Home Modernizing Exposition, May 24, 1937. Walter McAllister, Sr. Papers, Box 8, Walter McAllister Speeches Misc. Subjects Folder, San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection. Hereafter McAllister Papers.

depression. For FDR, the federal government had to take an active stand in the recovery process. “It is not enough that the wheels turn. They must carry us in the direction of a greater satisfaction in life for the average man,” Roosevelt said in his state of the union speech to Congress in 1937. Specifically, he argued that one of the nation’s most pressing issues was the “menace” of inadequate and poor housing conditions that pervaded all areas of life from the big cities to the rural areas.<sup>5</sup> How the administration would combat the crisis in housing would have ramifications for generations.

The federal government’s first major intervention in housing came within the first 100 days of the Roosevelt administration as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). NIRA’s main purposes were to “increase employment, to improve housing for the poor, to demonstrate to private industry the feasibility of large-scale community planning efforts, and to eradicate and rehabilitate slum areas.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the rhetoric, however, the FDR administration prioritized job creation over public housing. Public housing expert and advocate, Catherine Bauer, argued that the administration’s housing policy could rightly be described as “chaos” and housing was “introduced . . . as an emergency measure to provide employment and not as housing policy per se.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the administration was always lukewarm about public housing policy, preferring market-based solutions rather than direct housing creation. Both the Home Owners Loan Corporation (1933) and the Federal Housing Administration (1934) focused on the private housing market. Essentially the HOLC refinanced troubled mortgages at lower,

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<sup>5</sup> “President Roosevelt’s Message Read in Person Before Congress,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1937.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 220.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 241.

fixed rates over a longer duration. This type of amortization helped to stabilize mortgage payments for borrowers. The FHA's primary function was to subsidize risk by insuring mortgages. With the federal government backing loans, lenders could lend freely with negligible risk. Taken together, along with the addition of the Veteran's Administration home loan program in 1944, the state subsidized the massive movement to the suburbs in the late 1940s-1950s. Importantly, because of the segregated housing market, these federal programs served to reinforce segregation rather than eradicate it. Indeed, because many white suburban residents across the nation vigorously defended the color line claiming that integration meant a depreciation of their home values.<sup>8</sup>

The second major intervention into the housing market came in the form of public housing. While the federal government would ultimately prefer so-called market-based solutions to attempt to solve the housing crisis, there was a moment in the early 1930s where the progressive push for public housing was real. One of the central public housing proponents in the administration was Catherine Bauer. Bauer was a young Vassar College graduate from Elizabeth, New Jersey who had spent time in Europe as a young woman. Interested in European architecture and design, Bauer became enamored with the relationship between design and social reform. "Bauer was initially attracted to the modernist movement in the arts for aesthetic reasons, but she soon embraced the social idealism that permeated much of avant-garde culture at this

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<sup>8</sup> My understanding of federal lending practices during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been influenced by Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); along with *Crabgrass Frontier*, my thinking on the impact that federal housing policy has on the creation of a white homeowner identity has been influenced by Tom Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

time,” writes historian Gail Radford.<sup>9</sup> Bauer returned to the United States where she met Lewis Mumford and began work as an executive secretary at the small discussion group, the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), of which Mumford was a part. The RPAA was an early think tank devoted to creating better and more affordable housing in the United States. Her time at RPAA would help shape Bauer’s analysis of the urban housing problem in the United States as did her experience in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

After a second trip to Europe, Bauer began working on her book *Modern Housing* whereby she articulated her vision for affordable, public housing in the United States. Bauer’s main contention in the book was that the United States must move toward “modern housing”—a planned community devoid of speculation with space, recreation facilities, sanitary conditions, and a price that most people could afford, not just the poor. This was crucial. Bauer understood that for public housing to be a success in the United States, it had to have cross-class appeal. To facilitate that process, she believed that she had to create a grassroots movement in support of public housing to drown out the interest groups that preferred private housing because of the profit motive.<sup>11</sup> “Modern housing . . . cannot be patchwork. It’s not ‘reform’ within the old pattern,” argued Bauer. She envisioned sweeping, radical change in U.S. housing policy. In this Bauer offered similar critiques to capitalism from the left during this period in the interwar period. Nothing short of a housing movement would usher in an era that was freer and fairer for most Americans. Bauer and other progressives of the time believed that the built environment

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<sup>9</sup> Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 64. In general, however, Radford’s book, has informed my understanding of Catherine Bauer and the early New Deal push for public housing.

<sup>10</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, chapter three, especially, 64-69.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Bauer, *Modern Housing*, p. xv.

could make the difference in one's life. She concluded *Modern Housing* on an optimistic note: "Instead of trying vainly to salvage the past, we must first safeguard the future."<sup>12</sup> Creating equitable housing policy was key to that brighter future.

Bauer's approach to housing was quite radical in the United States—a nation whose identity was enmeshed in its individualist ethos. For Bauer, this was precisely the reason she believed that residents—individual citizens—should form the backbone of the housing movement. She wanted to get them involved in their communities rather than standing apart. By creating the conditions for such community to develop, Bauer believed that creating a grassroots housing movement was in the realm of possibility. One could easily dismiss Bauer's vision for expansive public housing as pie-in-the-sky rhetoric; however, *Modern Housing* was published in 1934, amid the *early* New Deal. FDR had not articulated a comprehensive plan to tackle the housing shortage in the United States. In other words, there was a policy vacuum to be filled. The single-family house in suburbia was never a given. Indeed, without the intervention of the federal government into the private housing market vis á vis the programs in the FHA and VA—federal programs that essentially created the housing market—one could imagine in that moment of historical juncture within the administration, with the full weight of the New Deal state behind their efforts, pursuing a different path towards fully funding public housing and making it a reality. Certainly, that would have engendered widespread opposition, especially in Congress and with the real estate lobby, but the state overcame similar opposition when as it constructed the social safety net that would be the hallmark legislation that made up the second New Deal.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>13</sup> David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 176-177.

Bauer would continue to make a name for herself in the public housing advocacy sphere after *Modern Housing* was published in 1934. She joined a small, but influential, group called the Labor Housing Conference (LHC). The inclusion of labor's voice into the public housing conversation mattered a great deal. The LHC's goals argued that the state—local, state, and national—should provide federal dollars for the construction of large-scale preplanned communities on a non-profit basis whose administration would be comprised of workers and consumers.<sup>14</sup> Bauer toured across the United States with the LHC to talk about the expansion of local labor councils in 1935, but they lacked the funds to expand their vision widely.<sup>15</sup> Bauer's renown in public housing circles grew and she eventually caught the attention of Senator Robert Wagner who would go on to write the Housing Act of 1937 (Wagner-Steagall Act).<sup>16</sup> Bauer played an integral role in helping craft the legislation.<sup>17</sup>

Before Senator Wagner brought the final bill to Congress, he experienced some defeats on previous versions of the bill. Two groups had different ideas about how to pass public housing legislation: The National Public Housing Conference (NPHC) and the Labor Housing Conference with the assistance of Representative Henry Ellenbogen from Pittsburgh. The minutiae of the two bills are not necessarily relevant for our purposes except to say there was

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<sup>14</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, pp. 180-81. Here I paraphrase the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor, *Report of the Proceedings of the Fifty-Fourth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor* as quoted in Radford.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, Wagner also had a role in crafting the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (the Wagner Act) which guaranteed the right for workers to unionize and bargain collectively. For more on the Wagner Act, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), especially chapter one.

<sup>17</sup> Radford's discussion of the Labor Housing Conference informed my understanding of the organization, especially 180-188.

much overlap between the two bills, but on the parts that they diverged, it mattered. For instance, the LHC focused its attention on “relief for unemployment and on new buildings for families of low income” and an independent agency to oversee the project whereas the NPHC focused on slum clearance and local control.<sup>18</sup> Catherine Bauer of the LHC championed a separate entity to oversee the program because she believed, at least in part, that too much authority given at the local level would circumscribe the efforts because of powerful local real estate interests. The LHC believed “a variety of mechanisms had to be available [at the federal level] so that citizens who wanted to create housing for themselves might have a real opportunity to succeed against predictable resistance from locally powerful real estate investors.”<sup>19</sup> Bauer envisioned cooperatives and other nonprofit entities operating at the local level managing properties with the backing of federal funds.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, too, was the issue of slum clearance that Bauer rejected. Ideologically and pragmatically Bauer did not want to tie slum clearance to public housing projects because she believed that would constrain the ability of the state to create public housing that would appeal to a wide variety of income groups because land prices in the central city would likely be higher than on the outer edges of the community. Or, as Bauer argued in *The Nation*, some land speculators who owned property in some districts that were chronically depressed economically they would reap profits by “offloading” their land to the government at “current prices.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the land speculation and profit motive would likely increase the cost of the land thereby increasing cost of construction for public housing. This would be

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy L. McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act: A Case Study in the Legislative Process* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1957), 102-103.

<sup>19</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 185.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Catherine Bauer, “‘Slum Clearance’ or ‘Housing,’” *The Nation* 137, December 27, 1933, p. 731.

especially important in the ultimate bill that is passed in 1937. Moreover, slum clearance exacerbated the housing crisis further because it “temporarily decrease[d] the total supply of dwellings” since it took a year to complete a housing project on average.<sup>22</sup>

A consortium of special interests lobbied against both versions of the bill, everyone from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to the National Retail Lumber Dealers Association, which made passage unlikely.<sup>23</sup> But Bauer and the LHC impressed Senator Wagner and they helped him write the next iteration of the public housing bill. The version of the Wagner bill that made it out of conference was a compromised version but given their previous defeat and the fact that the LHC had worked on the new version, Bauer and the LHC relented. First, the bill would create one federal agency to oversee the program, the United States Housing Authority (USHA). It allowed for the creation of local housing agencies, it tied slum clearance to public housing, although the bill gave the USHA some flexibility “in case of an acute housing shortage in the area,” and perhaps most importantly the Byrd amendment which “set a limit of \$4,000 in construction costs on a family unit and \$1,000 on each room.”<sup>24</sup> The Byrd amendment killed any chance for public housing to gain widespread support. The monetary restrictions set forth by the federal government meant that developers had to use cheaper materials. This combined with the slum clearance provision meant that widespread public housing adoption was unlikely. Thus, Congress sent the administration a weakened and inadequate public housing bill. The Byrd amendment ensured that the state’s public housing experiment would be limited in scope and

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<sup>22</sup> Catherine Bauer, *A Citizen’s Guide to Public Housing* (Poughkeepsie: Vassar College, 1940), pp. 63-64.

<sup>23</sup> Radford, 188.

<sup>24</sup> McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act: A Case Study in the Legislative Process*, 394.

confined to poor Americans. Nevertheless, on September 1, 1937, President Roosevelt signed the Wagner-Steagall bill into law.

### **3.2 The Federal Government's Role in Maintaining the Housing Color Line**

With the advent of Wagner-Steagall, the state offered Americans two broad policy choices to solve the housing crisis. But the choices were never on equal footing. Mass support for the public housing option that Bauer envision never materialized. Legislators and special interest groups ensured that the bill arrived at the president's desk in a compromised state. Among the compromises: instead of centralized planning at the federal level, all decisions on where to build public housing would be done at the local level leaving local housing authorities at the will of powerful interest groups; the Byrd rule ensured that construction cost were kept low; the bill excluded all but the poorest citizens; and the "equal elimination" provision required that new public housing had to take the place of cleared slum housing.<sup>25</sup> In practice this often meant displacing more people than housing. Moreover, because of insufficient public housing as a release valve for the housing crisis created by slum clearance, *mexicanos* tended to live in single family homes that were older stock on the West Side.<sup>26</sup>

At the other end, the state incentivized the construction of private, single family homes through policy. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the FHA mortgage insurance program dramatically propelled white Americans into suburbia. The premise of the FHA mortgage insurance program was relatively straight-forward. The government became the

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<sup>25</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 189-190.

<sup>26</sup> One study concluded that "Mexicans Americans show a rather high rate of home ownership. Over 53 percent of the Spanish-surname households in Southwest metropolitan areas were home owners in 1960." Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, and Ralph Guzman, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 254.

guarantor of home loans issued by private industry, removing much of the risk for private lenders, so long as they met certain criteria. The FHA used HOLC residential security maps and surveys to determine eligibility for access to home loans. These maps divided metropolitan space into color-coded units of risk. The lower the risk, color-coded green on the maps, the better the chance the FHA would back a home loan in a given area. The higher the risk, color-coded red on the maps, the less likely the FHA would back a home loan in that area. This meant that private developers and lenders, rather than the federal government, assumed the risk of the home loan in “redlined” areas. Tom Sugrue argues, “most important in determining a neighborhood’s classification was the level of racial, ethnic, and economic homogeneity.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the more people of color in an area, the government assumed the greater the risk for lenders. Private lenders and developers had an easy choice, as most would build in areas that the FHA backed rather than take on greater risk for themselves. Thought this was not always the case as lenders could charge usurious interest rates for potential homeowners they deemed higher risk.<sup>28</sup> “The appraisal practices of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation thus perpetuated a vicious cycle of neighborhood decline,” Tom Sugrue concludes.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 43-44.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Nathan Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 44.

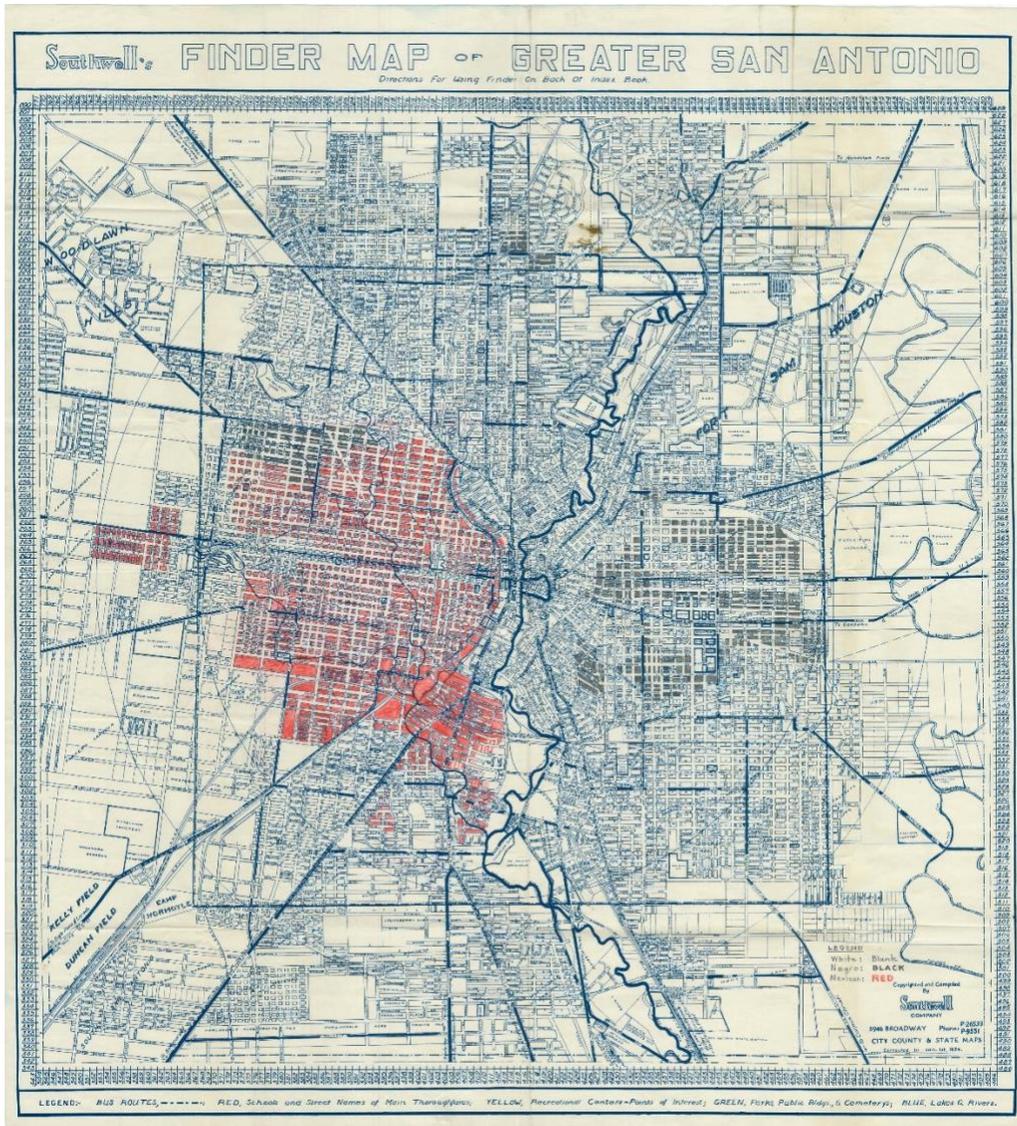


Figure 3.1: HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report: Racial Concentrations.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Home Owners' Loan Corporation, "HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report: Racial Concentrations," Oct. 29, 1935, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, <http://digital.utsa.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p16018coll12/id/78>.

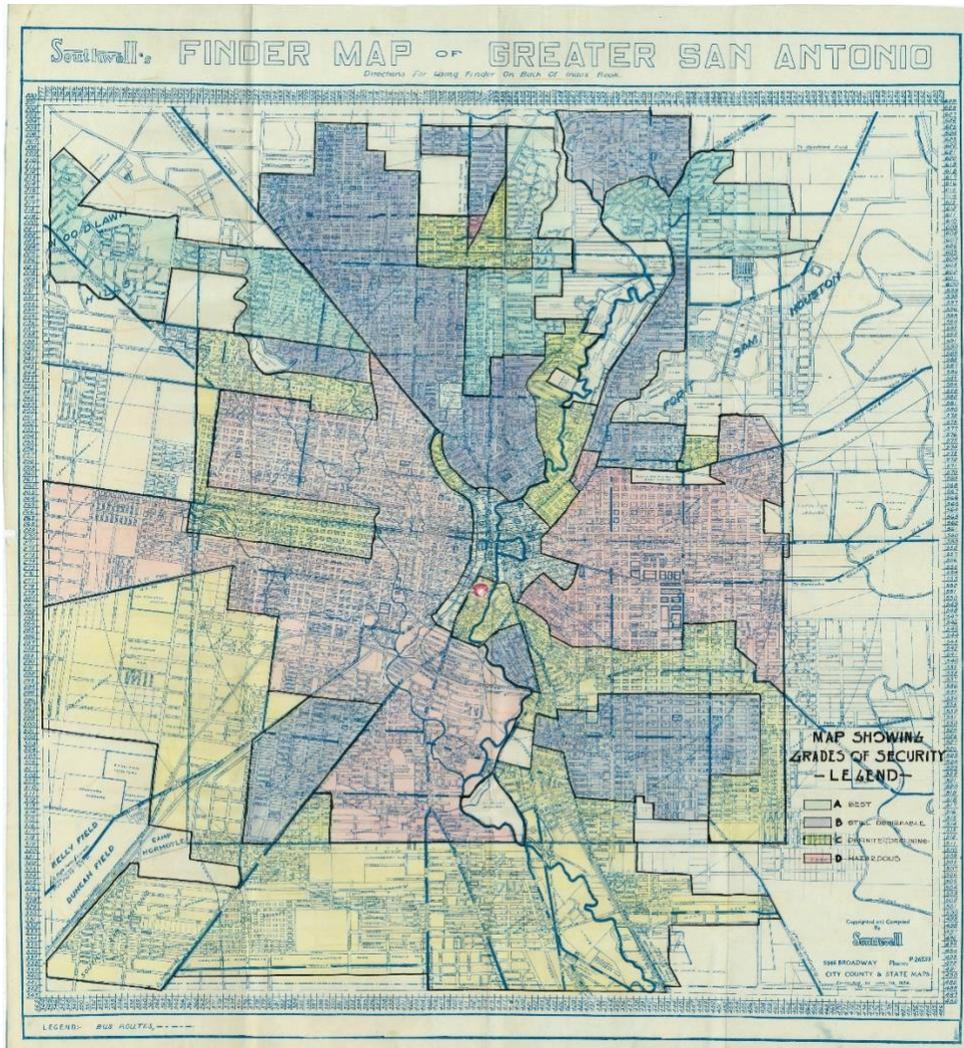


Figure 3.2: HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report: Grades of Security.<sup>31</sup>

The red in Figure 3-1 were *mexicano* homes in the West Side *barrio*. The African American East Side was color-coded in black on this map, and the HOLC left the Anglo northside blank. In Figure 3-2, the risk assessment map, risk mapped onto neighborhoods of color exactly. The *mexicano* West Side along with the African American East Side received the Grade D:

<sup>31</sup> Home Owners' Loan Corporation, "HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report: Grades of Security," Oct. 29, 1935, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections, <http://digital.utsa.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p16018coll12/id/36>.

Hazardous grade while adjacent neighborhoods where turnover was likely to occur received Grade C: Definite Declining. The neighborhood furthest away from concentrations of people of color—Anglo neighborhoods—received the Grade A: Best marks. The state set the conditions for private real estate agents and lenders to discriminate based on the data supplied by the federal government and postwar suburban growth would follow the general patterns set forth within the HOLC maps.<sup>32</sup> By and large, because of state action people of color in San Antonio remained in racially segregated neighborhoods for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, developers used racially restrictive covenants to restrict access to the housing market. For example, in San Antonio, Arthur E. Biard builders offered a “picture-book homesite” in the “exclusive Terrell Hills” incorporated suburban neighborhood. They promised a “high, cool and beautiful” lot filled with trees that had “sensible racial restrictions” on them. Even future mayor Walter McAllister had a restriction on his home that read in part, “No lot, tract, or re-subdivision thereof, shall ever be sold, leased, demised or conveyed by deed, lease, gift or otherwise to Mexicans, Negroes, or persons of either Latin American or African descent.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, developers sold a vision of suburban bliss to their clients free of potentially “unsavory” characters by availing themselves of appropriate land-use restrictions. For many Anglo homeowners, as this type of exclusion became seen not a prejudicial but as a right afforded to protect homeowners property. “Like zoning law and practice, the covenants bridge the pre- and postwar eras and, by doing so, helped fashion an

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of The United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), especially chapter eleven.

<sup>33</sup> “Deed Record, Restrictions,” December 27, 1949, Box 15, Subject Files, MS 142, Mario Marcel Salas Papers, University of Texas at San Antonio Special Collections.

economic and legal discourse that defined the exclusion of so-called inharmonious populations not as acts of prejudice but rather as sound land-use practice,” argues David Freund.<sup>34</sup>

Real estate agents denied World War II veteran, Perfecto Solis, Jr., the ability to purchase a home simply because he was Mexican American. “He [the real estate agent] then took us in his car to visit the homes, and we decided to attempt to negotiate the deal. We then returned to his office . . . and he started filling out the papers in connection with the purchase,” Solis wrote in an affidavit, “When he asked me my name, and I told him that it was Solis, he stated that he was sorry but he could not sell it to us because of a restrictive clause against the purchase or use by Latin-Americans.” Solis left the real estate agent’s office resigned to the fact that discrimination ran rampant in San Antonio. Moreover, his story illustrates the degree to which restrictive housing covenants were a common phenomenon in San Antonio. “I was not surprised that these restrictive clauses against Latin-Americans in general, and veterans in particular, seem to be quite common around here.”<sup>35</sup>

David R. Garcia had a similar encounter with a suburban contractor as he inquired about purchasing a home in San Antonio. His story merits quoting a length:

I spoke with Mr. H. P. Orts. He asked me how much money I made monthly and I replied that I made \$261.00. He said that I was eligible for the loan, but that there was a restriction against Mexicans. I told him that I was not a Mexican; that I am an American. He then told me that I was not [sic] considered a Latin American of the Caucasian Race and that because of that he could not sell me a home there. I told him that I thought that was a very undemocratic move and that as far as I was concerned I considered myself an American as well as the rest of them and that I

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<sup>34</sup> David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy & White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 98.

<sup>35</sup> Perfecto Solis, Affidavit, April 29, 1948, in Alonso S. Perales, *The Mexican American: Are We Good Neighbors?* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 139.

deserved my rights as such. Then he said he was sorry, but that there was nothing he could do; that the restriction was there and that the Guaranty Title Company would not approve the title to the property.<sup>36</sup>

Garcia identified himself as an American, but the fact that he was of Mexican descent limited his ability to move into the neighborhood that he desired. Despite his service to his country in the war, what mattered to Anglos in San Antonio was ensuring that ethnic Mexicans remained in their “place” in San Antonio’s West Side community. Furthermore, although Garcia attempted to access the privileges of whiteness by claiming Americanism, for the real estate agent who set the terms of the debate, it did not matter because to him, Garcia, regardless of citizenship status, was “Latin American of the Caucasian Race” which marked him as an other. Thus, while the housing market in San Antonio was more porous for ethnic Mexicans because of their ambiguous relationship with whiteness, it did not always afford the protections and benefits one might have wished. The racial logics that operated in San Antonio were never rational because individuals are not always rational.

After 1948, the *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision effectively nullified the use of racially restricted covenants from being enforced by the state. But, by then, Anglo developers learned how to use ostensibly colorblind land use restrictions such as minimum lot size restrictions or single-family home zoning to ensure suburban space maintained the color and class line.<sup>37</sup> The *San Antonio Light* published an article from Seward Mott of the FHA arguing that every homeowner should think about the factors that would cause depreciation on their “investment”

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<sup>36</sup> David R. Garcia, Affidavit, July 21, 1947, in Alonso S. Perales, *The Mexican American: Are We Good Neighbors?* (New York: Arno Press, 1974),144.

<sup>37</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 228-229.

over time. Specifically, he warned, “the scores of blighted residential blocks in almost every community [were] effective object lessons and should constantly remind every prospective owner of the dangers inherent in unprotected districts.” Mott spoke about restrictions broadly in terms of zoning ordinances and general land use practices, but his word choice in that instance was revealing. Similar to the term “slum,” “blighted” carried racial connotations that meant black neighborhoods in decline. When Mott talked about homeowners should be wary of the “dangers inherent in unprotected districts,” Mott purposely brought in the specter of black and brown bodies moving next door. The only way to ensure neighborhood homogeneity he said was to “see that all other lots in the neighborhood [were] similarly restricted.”<sup>38</sup>

White Americans did not see the FHA’s mortgage insurance program as a direct hand out from the government. Over time they understood homeownership as an entitlement that they earned through hard work. The degree to which the state subsidized their move to suburbia remained hidden.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the federal government created the housing market that developed in the postwar period for mostly white people who increasingly saw homeownership as an entitlement without acknowledging the federal government’s role in the entire process. David Freund reminds us that the federal government promoted FHA loans to businesspeople and homeowners alike. Central to the federal government’s argument was the myth of the free market with respect to housing policy. Indeed, the “housing market [was] highly regulated and unimaginable without the sustained federal involvement.”<sup>40</sup> But because these benefits were not

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<sup>38</sup> *San Antonio Light*, December 11, 1938.

<sup>39</sup> Suzanne Mettler makes a similar argument in her book *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> David Freund, “Marketing the Free Market,” in *The New Suburban History*, eds. Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 18.

overt as public housing, white homeowners, propelled by FHA marketing rhetoric, constructed a type of homeowner identity predicated on the unquestioned belief that the postwar housing boom was the result of the free market, and, importantly, that any attendant racial segregation was the result of market imperatives. In other words, at the heart of this story about the public and private housing debates that transpired during the New Deal is an issue that gets to the very heart of economic and racial inequality throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century: the idea that there are some people who *deserve* benefits and some that do not. This notion of deserving and underserving is intertwined with race and class so tightly that it cannot be disentangled. And while this type of inequality may have always existed in U.S. society, it became acute during a period of rapid government expansion during the New Deal when tendrils of the state work their way into areas and into programs that are not always visible such as housing or tax policy.

### **3.3 The “Rumpled Angel of the Slums”: Father Carmelo Tranchese and Public Housing in San Antonio.<sup>41</sup>**

The discriminatory housing market created by the federal government and reinforced by local real estate practices ensured that many San Antonians would greet the idea of federally funded public housing with great enthusiasm. By 1937, the housing crisis on a local level had magnified with the influx of people moving into San Antonio. There was not enough of the existing stock to accommodate everyone and what was there had deteriorated, especially on the West Side. As outlined in a previous chapter, the West Side was rife with cases of tuberculosis because of the crowded and unsanitary conditions. Many San Antonio residents and politicians alike looked at the new public housing law as an opportunity to help fix the problems in San

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<sup>41</sup> George Session Perry, “Rumpled Angel of the Slums,” *Saturday Evening Post*, August 21, 1948.

Antonio's housing market. Pursuant to requirements by the 1937 Housing Act, city officials created the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA) on June 17, 1937.

The needs for public housing assistance in San Antonio were dire. According to a SAHA housing survey conducted in 1939, 66,265 families resided within the city limits with another 9,412 families remaining outside. While the survey did not include every household, "the survey cover[ed] 52,556 families and/or dwelling units in sub-standard and part-substandard areas."

When broken down by race, the report estimated that:

- Latinos: 23,500 total families. Of that number, approximately 90% lived in sub-standard housing.
- African American: 6,000 total families. Of that number, approximately 74% lived in sub-standard housing.
- Anglos: 46,077 total families. Of that number, approximately 30% lived in sub-standard housing.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to poor housing, SAHA estimated that between 4-5% of all dwelling units had two or more families living in the same space. Thus, not only was San Antonio's housing stock decrepit for most San Antonio residents, especially Latinos and African Americans, but the housing shortage required families to double up. Interestingly, San Antonians of all races/ethnicities owned their homes in relatively large numbers. For instance, using the total number of families living in substandard homes noted above, homeownership percentage estimates for Latinos, Anglos, and African Americans were as follows, respectively: 43%, 60% 41%.

Joe Bernal, a longtime resident of the West Side, recalled that his family's house growing up was so small that he and his siblings often slept outside because it was cooler in the

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<sup>42</sup> San Antonio Housing Authority, "San Antonio Housing Authority Annual Report," 1939, p. 2. San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection.

summer and more spacious as Bernal had six other siblings.<sup>43</sup> Although Bernal lived in several different houses growing up, one thing remained constant, they were all modest “shotgun” style homes, also often called corrals. “These dwellings were perhaps no larger in size than ten feet by ten feet. Composed of one room or two, with possibly a lean-to kitchen in the back, each hovel usually housed one family, but there were occasions when three or four families, numbering anywhere from three to seven members each, shared the dwellings,” describes historian Donald Zelman.<sup>44</sup> See Figures 3.3 – 3.5.



Figure 3.3: Mexican Corral, 1939.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Joe Bernal interview, Interview by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/>. Hereinafter CRBB Bernal interview.

<sup>44</sup> Donald L. Zelman, “Alazan-Apache Courts: A New Deal Response to Mexican American Housing in San Antonio,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 87, no 2 (October 1983), p. 126.

<sup>45</sup> Russell Lee, photographer, *Mexican Corral*, San Antonio, Texas, March 1939, Farm Security Administration,



*Figure 3.4: Detail of Mexican Corral, San Antonio, Texas, 1939.<sup>46</sup>*

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Office of War Information Photograph Collection, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017782504/> (accessed November 15, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Russell Lee, photographer, "Detail of Mexican Corral," San Antonio, Texas, March, 1939, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017739484/> (Accessed November 15, 2018).



*Figure 3.5: Back of Negro Dwelling, San Antonio, 1939.<sup>47</sup>*

The Works Progress Administration sent photographers around the country to document life in American during the Depression era. San Antonio was among the cities visited. From the pictures, the Mexican housing situation in San Antonio was dire. Most of these homes appear to be constructed out of wood in a cell-like, dormitory structure as Zelman described. The photo of the African American home is quite similar to that of ethnic Mexicans. It appears as if this home is a stand-alone, whereas the shotgun-style homes in the other photos were the norm. I suspect

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<sup>47</sup> Russell Lee, photographer, "Back of Negro House," San Antonio, Texas, March 1939, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017739488/> (accessed November 15, 2018).

that people constructed both types of homes—stand-alone dwellings as well as multiple unit, dormitory-style. What is interesting about these two photographs is that the homes were raised above the ground. During the wet season, rain would often flood the two nearby creeks. The overflowing water would not only flood some of the lower lying areas, but completely turn the living conditions into a muddy, unsanitary mess. Not all homes were raised like the photo of the African American home which was closer to the ground. Perhaps that indicated that these houses were closer to the flood plain of the Alazan and Apache creeks or that the owners/landlords of the homes had more income to create slightly better structures that kept their homes out of the muck.<sup>48</sup>

The poor living conditions on the West Side meant that diseases such as tuberculosis ran rampant. Father Tranchese of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish was instrumental in helping shine a spotlight on the needs of the poor in the *barrio*. He used his position within the community to pressure both the federal and local government to take seriously the needs of *mexicanos* living on the West Side. In addition to hosting soup kitchens for the striking pecan shellers in 1938, Tranchese opened a health clinic out of his church and created space for recreation as well. Tranchese was deeply committed to improving the social, material, and spiritual well-being of his community. Despite all these worthy endeavors, Father Tranchese is perhaps best remembered in San Antonio for his work to bring public housing to San Antonio. Indeed, without Tranchese's seemingly indefatigable energy and efforts, public housing in San Antonio may never have materialized.

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<sup>48</sup> Leah Miranda Garrison, "Preserving the Projects: An Approach to Reclaiming Mid-Century Public Housing," MA Thesis, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas, August 2018, p. 46.

Father Tranchese took over Our Lady of Guadalupe Church late in life. Born in Italy in 1880, Tranchese came to lead the West Side parish after having served the Church in various capacities across the United States. Tranchese could not stand the abject poverty endemic he witnessed on a trip he made through San Antonio before he took over Our Lady of Guadalupe. He described the women on the West Side as “hopeless” bent with the “weariness” that comes from years of arduous work. The men fared no better because they could not find the gainful employment that would, presumably, lift them out of the deleterious conditions on the West Side. Tranchese could scarcely wait to continue on his journey east to Florida. Tranchese said, “When I left San Antonio, I was more than glad.”<sup>49</sup> As fate would have it, the Church called on Tranchese to take over Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in July 1932. Ever the dutiful servant, at the age of 52, Tranchese made his way back to San Antonio to take over the flock he once described as hopeless.

Tranchese immediately began to get to work in his parish. One of Tranchese’s first projects was to create a community center for his parishioners. Tranchese wanted to create community on the West Side, and he wanted to combat some of the social ills he saw in the area. By creating a multiuse space, he could provide recreation for children, sports for children, a venue for social events, a meeting place, and a place whereby the future health clinic would operate out of. Indeed, in San Antonio during the Depression years, with constraints on municipal funds, private charities—especially local churches—often filled the void in terms of relief work. According to one study, “Guadalupe Church [was] particularly active in welfare work” by operating a soup kitchen that fed “thousands of hungry people” who were in need. The

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<sup>49</sup> As quoted in J. Gilberto Quesada, “Towards a Working Definition of Social Justice: Father Carmelo A. Tranchese, S.J. and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, 1932-1953,” *The Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture* 4 (1993), p. 46.

church also offered a “program of rehabilitation through employment.”<sup>50</sup>Tranchese lobbied the San Antonio community chest for funds to build the center.<sup>51</sup> he understood that part of creating a vibrant community in the *barrio* meant making the church central to that equation. Plus, Tranchese sincerely believed in his calling to improve the lives of his parishioners.

In a short time, his hard work paid off as Our Lady of Guadalupe Church became the heart of the West Side community with Tranchese at its head. As a young child growing up in Depression era San Antonio, Joe Bernal recalled that Our Lady of Guadalupe was essentially his second home because he was there so much. His mother was a devout Catholic.<sup>52</sup> She told him, “*Tenias que ir a misa y tienes que y tienes que.*” (You had to go to Mass and you have to, you have to).<sup>53</sup> A wry priest, Tranchese did not simply assume people would show up to mass. Bernal wistfully remembered that Tranchese had his own small drum and bugle corps in the parish. Every Sunday morning at around 8:00 am, Tranchese would gather his band and march through the streets of the West Side. Mothers would gather their children and line up behind the priest as he wound his way through the neighborhood, his flock in tow for the 9:00 am mass. Bernal would later say this reminded him of the story of the Pied Piper. In addition to mass, Tranchese used his makeshift band as a musical town crier to announce a play that the church put on. Bernal vividly remembers the plays because they usually revolved around good and evil themes

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<sup>50</sup> American Public Welfare Association, *Public Welfare Survey of San Antonio, Texas: A Study of a Local Community* (1940), p. 119.

<sup>51</sup> George Sessions Perry, “Rumpled Angel of the Slums,” *Saturday Evening Post*, August 21, 1948.

<sup>52</sup> Joe Bernal interview, Interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>53</sup> Oral History Interview with Joe Bernal, by José Angel Gutiérrez, April 17, 2003. <https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/interview.php?cmasno=169> (accessed December 1, 2018).

that he enjoyed. Most everyone enjoyed the Passion Play that the church hosted during Christmas and Easter.<sup>54</sup>

The church became integral to so many people's lives that they would remember the lessons instilled in them from an early age. Of the church, Joe Bernal concluded:

“Anyway, a lot of the culture, a lot of the culture that became a part of me, the passionate feeling about culture, I think was an outgrowth of childhood and the backyard of Guadalupe Church. And the, and a very activist priest and of course, Jesuits have always been very, very pro people, very anti-establishment and they've been thrown out of more countries than, than, than anybody that I know of because they've always fought the establishment. But the, the, they did a good job with us, with some of us, with a few of us.”<sup>55</sup>

Another way to put this is that the church helped instill a sense of his self and formed an integral part of Bernal's identity. So foundational was the church to Bernal's upbringing that it helped create a sense of, perhaps, ethnic pride. Bernal attended Lanier High School where he was forced to speak English or face punishment by the Anglo teachers. Teachers co-opted students in their drive to enforce the “English only” rule while on campus. Student council members, of which Bernal was apart, distributed ribbons to the entire student body. If a student council member heard another student speak English, the ribbon was taken away and that student was reported to the homeroom teacher.<sup>56</sup> By making Latino students feel badly about the language of their parents and all that that represented, such Americanization projects stripped away a piece of their rich cultural heritage. Or, as Bernal put it, if “you and to destroy a language and a culture, that's

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<sup>54</sup> Oral History Interview with Joe Bernal, by José Angel Gutiérrez, April 17, 2003. <https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/interview.php?cmasno=169> (accessed December 1, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

a good way to do it.”<sup>57</sup> And, so, in one sense then fierce advocates for community, for social justice, and reform like Tranchese helped instill a sense of self-worth that may have been damaged by the conflicting messaging kids like Bernal received in San Antonio schools.

It was with this spirit that Tranchese entered the public housing debate in San Antonio. Perhaps Tranchese’s most important contribution to the fight for public housing in San Antonio was lending his voice and moral authority to the fight. He helped put a name and a face on the plight of *mexicanos* in San Antonio who desperately needed some sort of federal intervention. In his speeches to anyone and everyone who would listen, Tranchese framed the debate in terms of slum clearance as a both a moral and public health benefit. In a meeting with the Junior Chamber of Conference and the Lion’s Club, Tranchese argued, “the slums of San Antonio are not only the center of disease, but the breeding place of crime.” Moreover, the eradication of slums would help alleviate the tuberculosis problem that plagued the West Side.<sup>58</sup> The idea of slum clearance appealed to a wide variety of individuals, from the Lion’s Club folk to the Mexican American middle class. Alonso Perales, one of the founding members of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and its third president, argued that “every Latin-American group is behind the clean-up effort.” In addition to LULAC a host of other middle-class groups announced their support including the Mexican chamber of commerce, the Mexican business association, and several churches across the denominational spectrum. The United States Housing Authority (USHA) also encouraged boosters such as Tranchese to go out and actively recruit “labor, women’s clubs, civil and social agencies, churches, local governmental units,

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<sup>57</sup> Oral History Interview with Joe Bernal, by José Angel Gutiérrez, April 17, 2003. <https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/interview.php?cmasno=169> (accessed December 1, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> “Slum Conditions Arouse Citizens,” *San Antonio Express*, September 3, 1936.

housing and planning organizations and other interested individuals” to support the Wager-Steagall Act.<sup>59</sup> Given the two previous defeats, drafters of this legislation knew it would be a tough sell without outside support. Indeed, that labor signed onto the final iteration of the Wagner-Steagall Act helped push it over the edge in Congress.<sup>60</sup>

And, finally, the state engaged in a public relations campaign to get people on board with public housing by creating brief question and answer programs. For example, the United States Housing Authority (USHA) authored a pamphlet titled, “Housing and Your Community.” The USHA authority frames it in a similar manner as Tranchese in his public statements except that this pamphlet was geared mainly towards homeowners. It appealed to homeowner self-interest when making claims about public housing. For example, the pamphlet warns the reader that “slums that stick out like sore thumbs” and “as you drive away from outright slums, nine chances out of ten you’ll run into once respectable neighborhoods that are just beginning to yield to encroachment of slums.” The government presents the specter of these slums moving into the homeowner’s neighborhood with all the pejorative connotations that come along with slum areas. In another part of the pamphlet, the USHA allayed fears about competition with private industry. “Public housing thus offers no threat of competition with the private builder,” assures the USHA. And, finally, one should support public housing because it’s the fiscally responsible thing to do. Substandard housing, the pamphlet argues, creates down ticket problems such as crime, disease, and the general upkeep of rundown parts of town would be too expensive.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Dorothy P. Schoell to Father Carmelo Tranchese, March 9, 1937. Tranchese Papers.

<sup>60</sup> “West Side Groups Back Slums Project,” *San Antonio Light*, September 8, 1936.

<sup>61</sup> United States Housing Authority, *Housing and Your Community* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1940).

At the local level as well, the SAHA also engaged in a public relations campaign. In SAHA's 1939 Housing Survey, at the end of the document, SAHA included an extensive Q&A section. Although this document was probably not made widely available—it is not in leaflet form—the Q&A seems as though it was designed to help politicians and those who had direct contact with the public deal with questions that had been asked about the public housing project. The questions ranged from simple total cost to the taxpayer to the more complex such as will income restrictions mean that people living in these homes forgo getting a better job to stay in public housing. SAHA answers every question forthrightly and in a transparent manner. For example, when asked how much it would cost to rehouse everyone in San Antonio who lived in substandard housing, they answered \$40,000,000. The cost of the actual project was approximately \$10,000,000 with 90% of that footed by the federal government. The state understood that it had to get buy-in from the public—homeowners—otherwise support for the experiment in public housing would likely decline.

The language used to describe the public housing project is interesting. Because Tranchese and other advocates for the creation of public housing use “slum clearance” as a stand in for all the social ills that accompany that space, the racialization of the word “slum” does a lot of work. Anglos in San Antonio were already primed to see the West Side as a site of disease, criminality, and licentiousness. By talking about the creation of public housing, not as a net positive, something being created, but a net negative, something being destroyed—slum clearance and the pejorative racial and class baggage that accompany that term are mapped on to one another. In other words, the discursive framing of the public housing debate happened in such a way that people reading it in the paper or listening to people discuss it at town halls will hear what they want to hear. Despite Tranchese's earnest desire to help his parishioners, he too

embraced the language of slum clearance which racialized all *mexicanos* in a certain light. Given his position within the clergy, it was perhaps not surprising that he would see himself in a paternalistic light helping to save the denizens of the *barrio* that he served. Likewise, middle-class *mexicanos* embraced the project as a chance for uplift. People like Escobar had been fighting disinvest and disinterest on the West Sider for years. Finally, the federal government and city paid attention to their plight. And, again, the idea of public housing was new. It is easy to understand how people would think of such a project in a beneficial light without fully appreciating the policy implications that transpired as SAHA displayed more people than they could build homes for as the need outstripped the supply. Developers saw a chance to turn a profit. Perhaps some *mexicanos* in the *barrio* worried about where they would live should their houses be torn down. Others, like Bernal believed the public housing projects offered an opportunity to move up, to literally move up out of the dirt, and muck, and squalor that they had lived in. “It’s all cement,” Bernal said. “And when you close the windows” the windows actually closed unlike his current home. Moreover, “the [cement] floors would be nice and cool and we could [have slept] on the floor.”<sup>62</sup> In each instance, however, what is not talked about was the development of quality public housing. Catherine Bauer’s fears about tying slum clearance to public housing seemed to be coming to fruition. As local agencies ran the numbers in San Antonio, the spacious, innovative, neighborhood planning that Bauer envisioned would be replaced by low cost, cheaply made, limited quantity housing for San Antonio’s poorest.

Between 1932 and 1939, Tranchese was one of the most visible leaders in the housing movement in San Antonio, Texas. Tranchese spoke with anyone who would listen to him talk about the needs of his parish. During this period, both Tranchese’s plight, the deplorable

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Joe Bernal, interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

conditions of the West Side *barrio*, and the conditions of the pecan shellers put San Antonio on the map. In 1935, FDR wrote a letter to Tranchese asking him about the conditions in San Antonio. FDR said, “I shall deem it a favor if you will write to me about the conditions in your community. Tell me where you feel your government can better serve the people.”<sup>63</sup> The letter itself seems like a stock letter that would be sent out for widespread circulation by the White House, but Tranchese took it as an invitation to continue pushing for his agenda. By June 1937, things begin to pick up speed in San Antonio as the city council authorized the creation of a local housing authority, the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA), in line with the requirements of the bill winding its way through Congress. Mayor Quin appointed Tranchese to serve on its board.<sup>64</sup> In the same year, SAHA sent off their proposal to the United States Housing Authority (USHA), they agreed, and earmarked 4,000,000 for the projects.<sup>65</sup>

In 1939, however, things took a turn when a group of San Antonio landowners refused to sell their land to SAHA. After some negotiation, SAHA agreed to the higher price but the USHA administrator, Nathan Straus, balked at the higher price point and put the deal on hold.<sup>66</sup> Scared that the dispute would disrupt progress, Tranchese wrote a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt to ask for to intervene on behalf of the citizens of San Antonio. She called Administrator Nathan Straus to inquire about the delay. Straus informed Roosevelt in a letter dated April 11, 1939 that the “selfishness and greed of individual landowners” have caused the delay.<sup>67</sup> Apparently unsatisfied

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<sup>63</sup> FDR to Tranchese, September 23, 1935, Tranchese Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Quesada, *Father Tranchese and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish*, 56.

<sup>65</sup> “Broadcast Honors Father Tranchese,” January 27, 1947, *San Antonio Express*.

<sup>66</sup> Garrison, “Preserving the Projects,” 52.

<sup>67</sup> “Straus to Eleanor Roosevelt,” April 11, 1939. Tranchese Papers.

with Straus' answer, Eleanor Roosevelt wanted to visit San Antonio for herself. Upon meeting Tranchese at his church, she said "I had to come here first, because I had no choice. I was under orders from your friend, the President."<sup>68</sup> Father Tranchese gave her a tour of the *barrio* and followed up her visit with a letter imploring her to do what she could to ensure the program continued.<sup>69</sup> The visit from Roosevelt seemed to work because within short order, the Straus ordered the project to resume after SAHA reduced some of the acreage and number of buildings. In total, SAHA proceeded to build five low-rise housing complexes.<sup>70</sup> "I am always a little hesitant about relaxing, even in the slightest, our efforts to keep our costs, especially land costs, down to the absolute minimum," Straus explained in a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt. Nevertheless, he granted the "concession" for San Antonio's project because of the dire conditions in the city.<sup>71</sup> Historians are critical of Nathan Straus' tenure at USHA because he lacked the political skill to navigate Washington D.C.'s political waters adeptly. He acquiesced to critics of public housing hoping that by keeping costs low that would mitigate criticism of the program; however, that type of frugality at the national level, combined with stringent requirements set forth by the Byrd amendment, meant that the USHA had little margin to operate with. As a result, construction costs took the first hit which meant cheaper materials, smaller developments, ensuring that only the poorest would seek shelter in public housing.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Eleanor Roosevelt to Tranchese," as quoted in Quesada, 60; in later years, when honoring Tranchese for his efforts, several newspaper articles also reference the visit. See, for example, "Broadcast Honors Father Tranchese," *San Antonio Express*, Jan. 27, 1947.

<sup>69</sup> Quesada, *Father Tranchese and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish*, 61.

<sup>70</sup> Zelman, "Alazan-Apache Courts," 139.

<sup>71</sup> Nathan Straus to Eleanor Roosevelt, May 5, 1939. Tranchese Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 191-192.

In the end, by the end of World War II, San Antonio had five, segregated, public housing projects in San Antonio: the Alazan and Apache Courts and the Lincoln Heights Courts on the West Side, the Wheatley Courts on the East Side, and the Victoria Courts near downtown. The Alazan-Apache Courts were designated for *mexicanos*, Wheatley and Lincoln Heights for African Americans, and Victoria Courts for Anglos. In total, a little over 2500 families moved into public housing as it became available.<sup>73</sup> There were floor plans for a three, four, and five-bedroom home. Respectively, rents were set at \$6.65, \$7.50, and \$8.55.<sup>74</sup> The SAHA opened each project on a rolling basis throughout the early years of 1940, and all five had been completed well before 1945. Mayor Maury Maverick, Jr. issued a proclamation that June 28, 1940 was public housing day.<sup>75</sup> Maverick, a liberal Democrat and supportive of the New Deal, helped usher the Wagner-Steagall Bill through Congress by lending his support as a Congressman. Maverick served in Congress for two terms from 1934-1938. Upon leaving Congress, Maverick ran a contested race for mayor of San Antonio and served in that capacity for two years.<sup>76</sup> Although the first public housing project, Alazan, would not open officially until August 1 with the selection of the first tenants to begin throughout that July. Nevertheless, it was a big moment for San Antonio, and Mayor Maverick had a formal ceremony with invited speakers and a luncheon.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> San Antonio Housing Authority, "San Antonio Housing Authority Annual Report," 1939, Q&A section at the back. San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection.

<sup>74</sup> "Court Rule Speeds up Housing Jobs," *San Antonio Express*, June 28, 1940.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> For more information on Maury Maverick, Sr., see Richard B. Henderson, *Maury Maverick: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1970).

<sup>77</sup> *San Antonio Express*, June 28, 1940.

One could imagine how the *mexicano* community understood the change happening around them and the hopefulness that something like the construction of public housing in the *barrio* would engender among that community—as both a material improvement in their lives as well as a symbolic victory when the state marshals its resources in service of the nation. Labor leader Emma Tenayuca organized the Latino community around issues of labor rights, decent pay, and better working conditions in 1938, just a year before the first housing project opened. Eleuterio Escobar exposed the reality of unsafe and unequal schooling conditions *mexicano* children faced in school and demanding something be done. And Father Tranchese’s indefatigable fight to improve the health and living conditions of everyone on the West Side. It is no accident that these events emerged out of the Great Depression where San Antonio’s *mexicano* community felt the most pain, suffering, and unequal treatment from a negligent state. These kinds of moments of community formation in the *barrio* mattered a great deal to people who often felt left behind and marginalized. It mattered that they could count on members of their own community to come to their aid in time of need, be it at Tranchese’s soup kitchen or on the plaza listening to a young communist talk openly about solidarity and the strength in numbers, the strength of a union. While conducting the oral history interview with Joe Bernal, one thing that struck me at the time was how precise he was when he talked about the opening of the Alazan-Apache Courts. He knew exactly when it opened and remembered clearly the change public housing—or perhaps the New Deal more broadly—wrought within his community, even though he continued to sleep under the stars with his siblings in a home they never owned. For him it was almost as if the Alazan courts represented the promise of what could be—and in many ways what he already had—in a community like San Antonio’s West Side.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Joe Bernal interview, interviewed by Vinicio Sintá and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

### 3.4 The Pitfalls of Public Housing

For many San Antonians, the public housing projects that the state built helped to revitalize the community and provide good homes for families in need. One of the problems, however, was that the bill that came out of Congress did not go far enough to make a meaningful impact on the lives of the vast majority of the people who did not directly benefit from the program. In other words, the limitations on the Wagner-Steagall Act became apparent on the ground in local communities such as San Antonio. This combined with the belief that political economy was a zero-sum game meant that perceptions about public housing in San Antonio soured, and across the nation, despite the good it did inside the Latino community.

Housing expert Catherine Bauer argued that public housing should be radical and participatory. In her writing, Bauer envisioned a community brought together by good design choices that facilitated connection and interaction: a planned community. Bauer believed “architecture is a social art.” She believed badly planned housing could create a certain level of chaos in the housing market or it could be aspirational. For example, Bauer argued “If buildings do not express an integrated society they merely state the fact that society is discordant—and little more.”<sup>79</sup> Here Bauer seems to suggest that how housing was constructed has a societal outcome, a notion she picked up from her travels in Europe.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps there is some truth to this argument: design matters, as does policy. Thus, if one creates policy that favors sprawling suburban landscapes dotted with ranch-style homes connected by a federally funded highway system, the state plays a part in creating the impetus for a car culture to develop. Might it not be

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<sup>79</sup> Bauer, *Modern Housing*, 214.

<sup>80</sup> Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 125.

the case that creating the radical planned communities from the bottom up that Bauer envisioned that communal living would engender a sense of connection to the larger community in a way that suburban living does not? In large part, this was why Bauer wanted to disentangle slum clearance from housing policy so that local housing authorities had the flexibility to buy cheaper land elsewhere to create the kind of lived environment that would be conducive to communal life, or at least the kind of communal life that Bauer envisioned. Instead, by tying slum clearance so closely to public housing creation in the Wagner-Steagall bill, the state guaranteed that new housing projects would have to be built in central cities leaving the outskirts of town for private residential market.

Moreover, in tandem with FHA housing practices limiting access to slum clearance areas meant that public housing exacerbated racial and class segregation in the areas that the state-built projects. For example, in San Antonio, of the five projects built during by the USHA, four of them were completely segregated entities. As we can see with the public housing policy in San Antonio, the state explicitly decided how the color line ought to operate. The SAHA Survey explicitly designated the Alazan and Apache Courts for Latinos, the Wheatley and Lincoln Heights for African American, and the Victoria Courts for Anglos. The state, through its housing policy, both in its public and private endeavors, reified the color line in San Antonio. The San Antonio case illustrates beautifully how artificial scholarly distinctions between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation were on the ground when the state continually remade the color line.<sup>81</sup> Finally, the limiting cost for construction along with high prices for land, meant that public housing

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<sup>81</sup> San Antonio Housing Authority, *San Antonio Housing Authority Annual Report*, 1939. San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection. Scholars have been moving away from using the imprecise designations of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation. See, for example, Matthew Lassiter, “De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth,” in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

became synonymous with black and brown bodies across the nation. As Rhonda Williams persuasively argues in her study of black women in public housing, the “postwar characterization” that conflated “urban space, race, class, and gender resulted in power dynamics that focused on individuals versus the structures that shaped their lives.”<sup>82</sup> Anglos pathologizing Latinos was nothing new: it happened in the 1920s when constructing the vice district, it happened during the Great Depression when Anglos scapegoated *mexicanos* for being social burdens on the state and targeted them for mass deportation/repatriation, and it would continue well into the postwar period.

Certainly not everything was negative about public housing in San Antonio, so it is important to note that a small aspect of Bauer’s communal life emerged in the Alazan-Apache Courts during the early years. Residents in the courts came together for social gatherings, formed men and women’s clubs, sponsored dances, and hosted movie nights at the social hall at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish. They even published their own monthly newsletter called *The Alazan-Apache Times* where a small staff put together short stories, events, editorials, and the like. In the back of each volume there were advertisements from small businesses in the area that likely sponsored the newsletter. Sometimes, *The Alazan-Apache Times* had columns that updated the status of local people serving overseas during World War II. For example, they mentioned that Specialist First Class Pete Garza returned home for forty days leave after a twenty-two-month tour in the South Pacific.<sup>83</sup> In another column, they announced that the courts hosted a Home Study Class whereby people could use free materials to study for the citizenship exam.

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<sup>82</sup> Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 127.

<sup>83</sup> *The Alazan-Apache Times*, Vol 4, No. 7, December 1945. Box 2, Assorted Materials Folder. Office of the Mayor, Gus Mauermann Records, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

The class met twice a week for three hours a night and worked with the San Antonio School District to ensure students received credit, and a certificate, for completing the course.<sup>84</sup>

The *Times* gave an insider look at life in the Courts during the war years or shortly thereafter. Many of the activities were hosted by Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, and the *Times* simply offered some free advertising. But there were clubs indigenous to the Courts such as the Men's Club and Women's Club. Another one called Club Bahia was a social club created to teach young people to dance. What we see is a vibrant social scene developing in and around the courts. The church was still the center of the community, but the Courts provided another means for people to come together and organize socially.

While most of the articles in the newsletter were innocuous, there were some that were paternalistic in nature. It is not likely that *The Alazan-Apache Times* had an official relationship with SAHA that managed the projects, but these columns allow us to peak into brief moments where the state encroached upon the lives of the residents. For example, an article titled "Is Your Yard Clean" chastised individuals for not adhering to notions of respectability. The staff writer called out individuals who left "big heaps of dry grass" on their lawns instead of putting the waste into the proper bins. The column ended with the writer offering the suggestion that everyone should make a New Year's resolution to recommit to keeping the Courts clean. Read one way that is simply an innocuous column about mundane matters that anyone living in close proximity to one another might face. Yet, one can also read it as a type of middle-class respectability politics filtering down into the Courts to "teach" working class and poor people

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<sup>84</sup> *The Alazan-Apache Times*, Vol 5, No. 9, February, (no year given). Box 2, Assorted Materials Folder. Office of the Mayor, Gus Mauermann Records, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

how to live correctly. It was light-hearted, but the message was clear: there was a right way and wrong way to comport one's self in the new living environment.<sup>85</sup>

Taken on its own, it was hardly noticeable. But in other columns there are similar passive aggressive critiques offered by the writing staff. For example, one column simply titled "Honesty" which implored readers to be honest with one another to "remember to pay our debts."<sup>86</sup> Then there was an announcement, sandwiched between a notice about a returning soldier on leave and one about teaching, that openly scorned a young woman: "Isabel Ayala had four sailors visiting her a few Sundays ago. I am sure that all of them were not her cousins."<sup>87</sup> At first glance, the comment is easy to skip past. Perhaps Ms. Ayala and the writer know each other and that is an inside joke between them. But taken in context with the other types of behavior that the *Times* policed, it seems clear that the insinuation was that Ms. Ayala needed to better comport herself as a lady. Her close association with her male companions was no longer her own business but that of the entire Alazan-Apache Courts to shame her for perceived impropriety. But, again, the impropriety was being defined by all largely all male writing staff who adhered to notions of middle-class respectability politics. Ms. Ayala had no say in the matter. Her reputation around the Courts likely suffered after the publication of the newsletter. And, because the small writing staff also exercised editorial control, we never get to hear Ms. Ayala's own voice with respect to this matter. If the publication of a weekly newsletter gave the

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<sup>85</sup> *The Alazan-Apache Times*, Vol 4, No. 7, December 1945. Box 2, Assorted Materials Folder. Office of the Mayor, Gus Mauermann Records, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

<sup>86</sup> *The Alazan-Apache Times*, Vol 5, No. 5, October 1946. Box 2, Assorted Materials Folder. Office of the Mayor, Gus Mauermann Records, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

<sup>87</sup> *The Alazan-Apache Times*, Vol 4, No. 7, December 1945. Box 2, Assorted Materials Folder. Office of the Mayor, Gus Mauermann Records, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

residents of the Alazan-Apache courts a sense of community, it also had the adverse effect of being able to tear down those that did not fit neatly within the paradigm of respectability.

Finally, through the pages of *The Alazan-Apache Times*, we get a glimpse into how the state inserted itself into the daily lives of the residents. For all the reasons listed above—the Byrd amendment, slum clearance, and construction constraints—public housing in San Antonio became synonymous with working class and working poor families. Due to federal regulations, SAHA established income limits for those wishing to live in public housing: \$350-850 a year depending on family size.<sup>88</sup> Another stipulation from the USHA let SAHA decide whether or not residents had to be U.S. citizens to qualify.<sup>89</sup> This sort of means testing meant that the state had to collect data from individual households annually to ensure that everyone was in compliance with the income threshold. *The Alazan-Apache Times* asked that residents prepare a list that included the following information for SAHA investigators:

- a) A list of the name of all the persons who live in the apartment
- b) Their relationship
- c) Their age and sex
- d) A list of those who are employed
- e) Where they work
- f) The dates of their employment
- g) Their rate of pay
- h) The amount earned during the past year

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<sup>88</sup> Zelman, “Alazan-Apache Courts,” 141.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

- i) Any other income of any member of the family, from whatever source
- j) A list of the deductions for social security
- k) Unemployment compensation
- l) Union dues
- m) Compulsory uniforms. No deductions will be allowed for income taxes or war bonds<sup>90</sup>

This is quite a list of information that the SAHA requested on its tenants. On the one hand it made sense that the state would need a way to verify income levels. Indeed, in 1948 reporting showed that rental income across all five public housing projects dropped significantly over the previous year because SAHA had to evict tenants who earned above the income threshold. The majority of the decrease came in the Alazan-Apache Courts, by approximately \$36,000 total.<sup>91</sup> This meant a significant portion of renters were evicted by the state simply because they earned too much for the USHA's target demographic.

On another level, this type of annual government inspection previewed the means testing invasive surveillance state that emerged in the postwar period. Increasingly as single mothers attempted to claim public assistance, the state pushed back. Because the assumption was that the head of household would be a man, the state decided that the best way to ensure single women were not "gaming" the system, invasive home visits were warranted. This was especially true for black women and women of color who were on the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program in the 1960s.<sup>92</sup> This illustrates the way the administrative and surveillance state gained

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<sup>90</sup> *The Alazan-Apache Times*, Vol 4, No. 3, August 1945. Box 2, Assorted Materials Folder. Office of the Mayor, Gus Mauermann Records, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

<sup>91</sup> "Rent Projects' Income to Show Drop in '48," *San Antonio Express*, January 25, 1948.

<sup>92</sup> Rhonda Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing*, 208.

power in the postwar period and hints at how the state deployed these powers unequally. The state often shamed and humiliated the poor, or simply made them jump through bureaucratic hoops, when they asked for public assistance. In high visibility arenas such as public housing and, in the 1960s, direct payment programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), such treatment and invasive overreach by the state became normalized, especially as welfare became highly classed and racialized over time.

Meanwhile, “invisible” subsidies that indirectly went to middle and upper middle-class white families went unchallenged in the same way. White families in the suburbs who overwhelmingly enjoyed FHA- and VA-backed loans saw them not as government subsidies but as entitlements earned by working hard, saving, and purchasing a home. In each instance, both types of programs are government subsidies, except direct payment programs were highly racialized. Thus, the government created the two-tier housing market: suburban growth was heavily promulgated through manipulating the credit markets in the favor of white families while public housing for the poor becomes seen as a handout for poor people and people of color.

On August 18, 1938, San Antonio’s top politicians held a banquet in honor of Father Tranchese’s work on San Antonio’s West Side.<sup>93</sup> Within six years of his arrival, he dramatically cleaned up his parish, helped shine light on the deadly tuberculosis problem on the West Side, and helped bring a multimillion dollar public housing project to San Antonio. “I don’t know why any of you honor me,” Father Tranchese declared. “If you could have seen what I have seen on the West Side, girls and boys dying of starvation, tubercular patients dying on their beds on the ground with nothing to eat but frijoles, you too, would work for their good.”<sup>94</sup> The problem,

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<sup>93</sup> “Tranchese is Honored For His Work,” *The San Antonio Light*, August 18, 1939.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

however, was that few people at that gala cared to look at the problems on the West Side. The structural problems created by disinvestment had always been there. The difference was that Father Tranchese decided to do something about it.

The public housing that eventually arrived in San Antonio invariably would be too little because the need in poor neighborhoods was so great. Catherine Bauer understood the problems that would arise from the compromised Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937, but it was better than nothing. By tying slum clearance to the creation of public housing and giving localities more control over where and if projects would be built, Congress ensured that the program would never reach its full potential. Despite its limitations, the program was a success for many people in San Antonio who were lucky enough to call one of the projects home. For *mexicanos* living in depressed, crowded conditions, the idea of public housing seemed like a good deal. For many working poor, anything was better than what they currently had. Ultimately, however, the public housing experiment would be a mixed bag. The idea of public housing that Bauer initially articulated was laudable, but as San Antonio operationalized the policy, public housing could not make a dent in the pervasive, long-term endemic poverty that came from years of disinvestment, economic segregation, and spatial segregation. In short, San Antonio's experiment with public housing would be a drop in the bucket compared to the actual need on the West Side.

As the United States moved into the postwar era, and San Antonio's economic growth skyrocketed, politicians would once again turn to the federal government to subsidize future growth. In the 1950s and 1960s, city leaders in San Antonio—just like leaders across the nation—took advantage of a host of municipal tools: slum clearance laws, eminent domain, and, especially, urban renewal to remake the city in their image. And by winning the bid to bring the World's Fair to San Antonio for the first time, those leaders believed that HemisFair '68 would

be San Antonio's coming out party. Just like in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as municipal leaders used vagrancy laws to funnel people into the West Side's red light district so as not to create problems for tourist and residential environments in "respectable" areas of town in spite of the people who lived there, politicians in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century would exploit the cultural heritage of a constituency to help sell the San Antonio as the "Crossroads of America."

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Politics of Urban Renewal in San Antonio**

“Public housing is the most Socialistic move America has made.” –Walter McAllister, mayor of San Antonio, 1961-1971.

The Housing Act of 1937, as part of the New Deal, helped establish affordable, public housing in the United States. The act established the United States Housing Authority, which offered subsidies to local municipalities to encourage the development of public housing units for the neediest residents. The San Antonio Housing Authority built five segregated housing projects across the city. By the end of World War II, the city had provided approximately 10,000 affordable homes to its residents. Those who applied and received an assignment to a new home likely found the experience an upgrade to their previous living conditions, especially if they previously lived in *corrals* on the West Side.

Despite the program’s popularity in San Antonio, it had its detractors. Some residents such as prominent banker, Walter McAllister, did not think the state should be building or managing homes for individuals. He believed in the strength of the market and felt that public housing was a “socialistic” enterprise that would degrade people’s desire to build and own their own homes and private property.<sup>1</sup> Unlike direct aid from the federal government in the public

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<sup>1</sup> Walter McAllister, “Public Housing: It’s Effects,” 1949. Walter W. McAllister, Sr. Papers, Box 7, Speeches, Public Housing 1939-1959 Folder, San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection. Hereinafter cited as McAllister Papers.

housing sector, McAllister did not mind federal intervention in the private housing and credit markets presumably because that was not seen as direct government intervention.

McAllister fit within a new breed of conservative business types that rose to prominence in the immediate postwar periods across the Sunbelt. Staunchly pro-business, McAllister certainly had his own personal politics and took a hard line against anything he viewed as socialistic but, above all, he was a pragmatic business leader. He and other business leaders felt that San Antonio lagged behind the rest of Texas in terms of economic development in large part due to the patronage system that defined San Antonio politics in the prewar era. Thus, in the postwar period, they decided to ensure their vision for progress would come to fruition, through their guidance. In 1951 they backed a proposal to amend the city charter to a council-manager form of government which undercut mayoral authority. Then they created an organization known as the Good Government League (GGL), which backed specific pro-growth candidates for election. Garnering the GGL backing all but ensured a successful candidacy. Between 1955 and its demise in 1975, the GGL-backed candidates rarely lost an election. The GGL replaced the Democratic machine with a pro-growth, business-friendly machine of their own making. After a series of lackluster outings in the late 1950s, the GGL wanted a strong leader in the mayor's seat. They convinced Walter McAllister, who had taken over a council seat when another member died unexpectedly. From there the council appointed him as mayor. In May 1961 McAllister began the first of five consecutive two-year terms as mayor of San Antonio and helped usher San Antonio through a period of dynamic growth in the city. The GGL understood that they needed someone of stature and friendly to their cause in the mayor's office. With firm control over San Antonio politics, the GGL could fully implement their vision of progress for the city which relied heavily on federal subsidies—in terms of urban renewal, “slum” clearance, and highway

construction. They wanted to “modernize” San Antonio for the 20<sup>th</sup> century so they developed a series of plans to accomplish that goal. In 1968 San Antonio would host the first World’s Fair located in the nation’s Southwest. It would serve as an affirmation of a decade’s worth of urban planning and a win for the GGL which was an integral part in bringing the fair to San Antonio.

The problem, however, was that the business community’s vision of progress for San Antonio left behind, both figuratively and literally, a large swath of residents on the West Side. The GGL-backed projects revitalized the downtown corridor, turning it into a commercialized area designed to encourage a cultural tourism predicated on a celebration of San Antonio’s bicultural heritage, while *mexicanos* on the West Side saw little improvement in their material conditions. Well into the 1960s, homes on the West Side were still poor *corrals* that lacked indoor plumbing. The streets still turned into a muddy quagmire during a heavy rain. Moreover, the GGL purposely pushed development projects towards the Anglo-dominated north side of town made more accessible by the creation of a system of highway systems, some of which was paid for with federal highway dollars. For many working-class ethnic Mexicans, the sprawl that this period of growth engendered—through specific policy proposals—meant they lacked access to the jobs and educational opportunities made available to middle class Anglo residents on the northside.

#### **4.1 Forcing the Old Machine Out**

In order to realize their agenda for San Antonio, the business elite first had to amend San Antonio’s city charter. In San Antonio, few businessmen achieved higher praise than Walter McAllister. Throughout his long public life in San Antonio, he was active in its affairs of the community, especially the business community. He was a self-described Republican on the

national level, but a Democrat locally, with an impressive resume to bolster his credentials. Born in San Antonio in 1889 to a family of German immigrants, McAllister received a degree in electrical engineering from the University of Texas in 1910. But it would be the business world in which he would make a name for himself. He managed the Frost estate, owned an auto finance company, and an insurance company.<sup>2</sup> Those enterpenuerial endeavors never satisfied McAllister. He ofund his true passion in banking. In 1921, knowing essentially nothing about the savings and loan business, McAllister and a few business associates opened the San Antonio Building and Loan (renamed later to the San Antonio Savings Association, or SASA.). McAllister said, "I gave at least 80% of my time to the savings and loan business. By the end of the first year we had less than \$50,000 in assets, which was a lot of money in those days."<sup>3</sup> In addition to his business ventures, McAllister helped found the San Antonio Junior College in 1945 and served on its board until 1960. He also served as president of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, as well as the director of the South Texas Chamber of Commerce. He also served as a founding member of the local Kiwanis Club. In 1953, President Eisenhower appointed McAllister to chairman of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board where he served for three years in Washington.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, Pamphlet listing Walter McAllister's Resume for his Bid to Serve as Chamber of Commerce President. Walter W. McAllister, Sr. Papers, Box 2, Chamber of Commerce 1950s Folder, San Antonio Public Library, Texana Collection. Hereafter cited as McAllister Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Walter McAllister, interviewed by Clyde W. Ellis, July 16, 1976. Transcript. Institute of Texan Cultures Oral History Collection courtesy of the University of Texas at San Antonio Digital Collections (<http://digital.utsa.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15125coll4/id/1697>). Hereafter cited as McAllister interview.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline B. Bass, "McAllister, Walter Williams, Sr.," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fmcys>.

In short, Walter McAllister epitomized the business elite of San Antonio. He was well-connected, affluent, ambitious, and pro-business. Just the type of person one wanted to have their corner when taking on the Democratic political machine in city hall. The idea for having a council-manager system of government began in the 1930s. In what came to be known as the Wednesday Club, McAllister and a few business luminaries discussed the advantages of having a council-manager form of government in San Antonio. Unsatisfied with the Democratic machine, they felt the city ought to operate more like a business. They did not want “professional politicians” running City Hall. They wanted professional managers running the city. More to the point, they wanted a mechanism in place where politicians could wield enormous influence to shape policy and the local San Antonio economy to their way of thinking. McAllister explained his rationale. “All the citizens . . . are stockholders of a corporation. They don’t run it, they elect directors and the directors are experienced businessmen. And they, in turn, select somebody who is a pro and the president of that corporation,” McAllister explained. “We’re doing the same thing here. We have a council of nine, and we select a city manager who is an experienced, trained man whose record in his city is open and available to us to study.”<sup>5</sup> The corporation analogy was critical to understanding how these boosters and chamber of commerce types understood local politics at the time. They fundamentally saw many of city’s problems as political mismanagement. But, make no mistake, this was a power grab. The business elite wanted a pliable city government that they could control.

One of the city’s biggest problems during the war years was exponential population growth, finite municipal resources, and delivering services and utilities to all parts of the city. One way to ameliorate some of those issues was through annexation to increase the city’s tax

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<sup>5</sup> McAllister Interview, 82.

revenues. Lenient annexation law in Texas “allowed the city to annex any adjoining unincorporated area by ordinance, with or without the consent of the affected residents.”<sup>6</sup> During the wartime tenure of Mayor Gus Mauerman, 1943-1947, San Antonio added 18,000 acres to the city’s tax rolls. Some residents were skeptical of the city’s designs. One resident, John Greene, wrote to Mauerman to warn the mayor that annexation had been tried and had failed many times in the past. He quipped, “I do not sit at my desk and annex your overcoat.” Greene wanted no part of San Antonio and wanted to ensure his “cow pastures” remained outside of San Antonio’s borders. Unfortunately, for Greene, the annexation ordinance passed which, presumably, included his property. This round of annexation included five areas and over 100,000 people and passed on a 3 to 2 vote in June 1944.<sup>7</sup> Once a part of San Antonio, some residents complained that the city did not provide adequate services to their areas. For example, one letter to the mayor simply signed “The Taxpayers” complained that the newly annexed territory in which they lived had inadequate access to bus transportation. They suggested either extending the current line or adding additional buses because the streets in their neighborhood lacked sidewalks and proved dangerous to oncoming traffic.<sup>8</sup>

Inadequate delivery of municipal services was one of the reasons business elites wanted to remake the city into a council-manager form of government. This would undercut mayoral authority and, at least in theory, allow for a democratization of political power in the city. Not all mayors were on board with relinquishing their authority. During the immediate postwar years,

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold Fleischmann, “Sunbelt Boosterism: The Politics of Postwar Growth and Annexation in San Antonio,” in *The Rise of the Sunbelt Cities* eds. David C. Perry and Alfred J. Watkins (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977), p. 154

<sup>7</sup> “City Annexes Five Suburban Areas,” *San Antonio Light*, June 24, 1944.

<sup>8</sup> The Taxpayers to Mayor Gus Mauermann, n.d., Office of the Mayor Gus Mauermann, Box 2, “Correspondence: Annexation Controversy folder. San Antonio Municipal Archives. Hereafter cited as Mauermann Papers.

McAllister created a new organization called the Council-Manager Association and broached the topic with Mayor Alfred Callaghan, who served as mayor from 1947-1949. Callaghan was the scion of Bryan Callaghan, who served three separate stints as mayor between 1885 and 1912 during the height of the Democratic party machine. Responding to McAllister's query, Callaghan replied, "Nope, we're not going to do it. I don't believe in that kind of government." He went further daring McAllister to run someone against him in the next election. McAllister, likely unaccustomed to being talked to in such a fashion, responded curtly. "Well, you know, Mayor, I went to see you and I'm very disappointed that you've acted the way you have, that you've arbitrarily refused to consider it at all. You've acted without discussion with your other members of the commission; but I'm going to say to you, furthermore, that I appreciate very much your suggestion, and we'll certainly take it under consideration." Callaghan had made a serious misstep and made a powerful political enemy. McAllister went back to his office and spoke with hotelier, and member of the Council-Manager Association, Jack White about running for mayor. "Jack," McAllister said. "I'm going to be the business manager of the campaign. I'll raise \$50,000, which is enough to get anybody elected mayor of San Antonio."<sup>9</sup> McAllister and his allies raised the money, and Jack White beat Callaghan in 1949. So pleased with White's election that the *National Civic Review* spotlighted White's election as a win for municipal reform.<sup>10</sup> McAllister had his man in office, the next step was to rewrite the city's charter and get it approved by the voters.

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<sup>9</sup> McAllister Interview, p. 84-88.

<sup>10</sup> H.M. Olmsted, "Manager Plan Advocate Sweeps San Antonio," *National Civic Review* 38, no 6 (June 1949), p. 288.

## 4.2 The Push for Council-Manager Form of City Government

With Jack White, San Antonio's business elite believed their had one of "their own" at City Hall. During the campaign against Callaghan, White stressed the possibility of what municipal reform would look like for the average voter. He promised improved constituency services in terms of "hospital expansion, a massive health program, neighborhood improvement, a fumigation program, improvement on virtually all municipal services, disclosure of city spending, and industrial growth."<sup>11</sup> In total, the new master plan called for \$32.5 million in infrastructure improvements to the city.<sup>12</sup> He also tied Callaghan to an outmoded machine politics that failed to deliver on its promises to the majority of San Antonians.<sup>13</sup> The messaging worked as White easily beat Callaghan and "the machine's incumbents lost resoundingly."<sup>14</sup> The era of San Antonio Democratic machine politics had come to an end.

White and his allies spent the next two years educating the public on the virtues of a council-manager form of government. The San Antonio *Express* editorial page ran sympathetic articles backing municipal reform. Question and answer flyers went out to the community where questions about a council-manager form of government were answered. But this was not a neutral document. It made a persuasive argument for the council-manager system. It emphasized efficiency in government by ridding city council of professional politicians and played up

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<sup>11</sup> John A. Booth and David R. Johnson, "Power and Progress in San Antonio Politics," in John A. Booth and David R. Johnson, eds., *The Politics of San Antonio: Community, Progress, and Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> "Businessmen Takeover San Antonio," *Businessweek*, January 12, 1952. Office of the Mayor A.C. White, Box 1, Council-Manager Government Folder, San Antonio Municipal Archives. Hereafter cited as White Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Booth, "Power and Progress," 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*.

managerial efficiency. This is precisely why the analogy of the city as corporation worked so well. It couched the debate in terms that everyday people would understand at a time when trust of corporations was high and corporate knowledge and business expertise were prized. “The manager plan unifies organizations,” the brochure argued. The “chief executive is selected because of his ability to provide expert, non-political administration, while the mayor-council form is headed by a partisan.”<sup>15</sup> Reformers wanted to hammer home the point that the council-manager system would bring a professionalization to the San Antonio’s municipal government that had not existed under machine rule. Importantly, the brochure stressed that the city manager could not be a “dictator” because of proper checks by the city council who could fire him at will.

That White and his allies extolled the business-like efficiency that would come from the council-manager plan was not unique. Indeed, many municipalities from across the country wrote to Jack White to congratulate him on his campaign victory. Ray Wilson, the city manager of Phoenix offered his congratulations on getting the new charter passed and his thoughts on the importance of a “properly drawn charter” based on his experience in Phoenix and Kansas City.<sup>16</sup> The *National Municipal Review* ran the story of White’s victory and seemed like an important vehicle for disseminating ideas about their theories on municipal government. Wilson warned White that he ought not stray too far from the “Model Charter of the National Municipal League” because that could compromise the strength of the charter; however, Wilson mentioned that charters should reflect the communities from which they were drawn to some extent.<sup>17</sup> Given that the language used to sell this new form of government to their constituents remained similar

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<sup>15</sup> “Answers to your Questions about the Council-Manager Plan for San Antonio,” Office of the Mayor A.C. White, Box 1, Correspondence Folder, San Antonio Municipal Archives. Hereafter cited as White Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Wilson to Jack White, June 20, 1951. Box 1, Correspondence Folder, White Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

despite locale, it is reasonable to conclude that the National Municipal League—along with its state offshoots, like the Texas Municipal League—had a common language used to describe the changes they deemed necessary in municipal reform. It is perhaps no surprise, then, during this period, council-manager elections swept across the Southwest. The *National Municipal Review* found that by 1953, ninety-three cities had adopted the council-manager form of government and made predictions that this form of government would be the “prevailing form of local government within the next decade.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, we can sense a concerted effort by business and their alliance in municipal leagues across the nation to frame the debate about the importance of running local government like corporations. But also that the ideas and the direction of change were being framed by an outside entity for a political purpose: to advance the agenda of business.

### **4.3 The Creation of the Good Government League**

On October 2, 1951, San Antonians adopted the new charter. Mayor White issued a brief statement upon learning of the charter’s passage. First he declared a big victory for the “forces of good government.” He made the case that the “friends of good government” fought an uphill battle against an entrenched establishment that did not give an inch of ground easily. If not for the “men and women who volunteered their time, their efforts—and their money” the campaign for better government in San Antonio would likely not have materialized.<sup>19</sup> That White emphasized the money aspect of the campaign was probably the most salient point in the entire

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<sup>18</sup> Here I borrow from Amy Bridges, *Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 101-102. Bridges quotes directly from the *National Municipal Review*.

<sup>19</sup> “Statement by Mayor Jack White,” October 2, 1951. White Papers, Box 1, Correspondence Folder. San Antonio Municipal Archives.

speech. From the outset, the San Antonio business elite understood that it would be in their interest to wrest control of the city government from the old machine. McAllister and his allies did not embark on municipal reform out of the goodness of their hearts. McAllister, if nothing else, was an astute businessman and banker who understood risk versus reward. He and his allies made a principled bet that if they leveraged their influence backed with their money, they could write their own ticket. But it was not only money that won them their campaign as nearly 3,000 volunteers worked on the campaign for White. These volunteers launched a sophisticated get out the vote campaign that contacted voters on the phone and in person when necessary. They had maps of the precincts which highlighted voting patterns and they focused heavily on the Anglo vote on the Northside which resulted in an Anglo turnout three times higher than the previous election.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the lofty rhetoric, the non-partisan future of efficient and effective local government run by dispassionate, expert business leaders produced more of the same type of politics. One machine defined by patronage was replaced by another that emphasized economic growth, engendered sprawl, and reified economic dislocation and racial segregation.. The move to neuter the mayoral power in favor of a strong manager and city council was a strategic calculation made by astute, rational businessmen. In 1953, President Eisenhower appointed McAllister to the chairmanship of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board (FHLBB) in Washington, D.C. While absent from the scene of San Antonio politics, the hope placed in Jack White's reign as mayor proved to be premature. Once in power, White was also reluctant to put aside his own priorities for that of the business community and "advocated a return to the old commission

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<sup>20</sup> "Businessmen Takeover San Antonio," *Businessweek*, January 12, 1952. White Papers, Box 1, Council-Manager Government Folder; Bridges, p. 118.

government they had just defeated.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the organization that ushered in the new council-manager plan faced electoral defeat in 1953 because of an overly ambitious annexation plan that would have incorporated 120 square miles of territory into San Antonio—three times as large as any previous annexation attempt. The new charter gave the city the authority to annex territory with a simple majority of the council. The problem for the municipal reformers was that their annexation plan cut through the property of two wealthy oilmen in San Antonio. Mayor White teamed up with the anti-annexation side which ultimately resulted in a major defeat for the municipal reformers.<sup>22</sup>

The stunning defeat forced municipal reformers to change tactics. No longer could San Antonio’s business elite rely on individuals to promote their agenda. They had to go on the offensive and control the terms of the debate. In 1954, Tom Powell of the San Antonio chamber of commerce along with sixty of his like-minded colleagues came together to form what would be known as the Good Government League (GGL).<sup>23</sup> This was a watershed moment in San Antonio electoral politics and would usher in a new era of municipal reform. The GGL’s primary purpose was to “promote honest, efficient and economical government through the Council-Manager Plan, and to encourage and support capable, public-spirited citizens to stand for councilmen in city elections.”<sup>24</sup> Many of the founding members of the GGL came from the various council-manager campaigns a few years previous. The power that the GGL wielded was enormous. The San Antonio Express editorial page supported the GGL. Its membership ranks

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<sup>21</sup> Rodolfo Rosales, *Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Fleischmann, pp. 156-157.

<sup>23</sup> Booth and Johnson, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> “Citizens’ Committee Support for the Good Government League,” *San Antonio Express*, January 27, 1955.

went from 60 to 3,000 members. It got to a point where one could not get elected to anything unless they had the GGL backing. Essentially, the GGL ran slates of preferred candidates that they vetted to ensure the “right” kinds of people were elected on the council. Once the GGL controlled the city council, they controlled the mayor’s seat because the council selected the mayor. But, it went further.

Between 1955 and 1971, the San Antonio GGL won 77 of 81 council seats.<sup>25</sup> The *Texas Observer* described the GGL’s importance wonderfully:

Since the GGL absorbed or killed off opponents one by one until now it exercises absolute control over the machinery of city government, which in San Antonio includes not only the ordinary functions, but also the gas and electric utilities, the water works, the bus system, the expanding urban renewal agency, and the housing authority, which owns and operates 5,000 apartments.<sup>26</sup>

Not just a stranglehold on the city council, but the GGL effectively controlled all the levers of power in the city of San Antonio. While the GGL ostensibly supported the council-member form of government because it democratized the process, the creation of the GGL usurped any notion of democratic self governance in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century San Antonio elections. In terms of actual governance, the power brokers within the GGL were twofold: the board of directors and the nominating committee. The nominating committee screened potential candidates for city council in secret to ensure whomever they selected for city council would vigorously pursue their agenda. There was zero transparency behind this process.

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<sup>25</sup> Rosales, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> John Rogers, “The City Elections,” the *Texas Observer* as quoted in Rosales, *Illusion of Inclusion*, p. 50.

#### 4.4 The West Side GGL

So ubiquitous was GGL membership in the 1960s that Mexican Americans from the West Side created their own branch of the GGL to collectively represent their interests within the GGL. I should note that the GGL was overwhelmingly Anglo, and solidly middle class. That racial and class component informed the GGL's agenda. But since anyone could join the GGL for a dollar, the membership base was not entirely Anglo. Also, the Westside GGL was not an actual organization per se but a group of like-minded Mexican Americans concerned with local San Antonio politics and business.<sup>27</sup>

Here I want to revisit Joe Bernal and his first bid into public office because it is instructive on how the GGL operated writ large and what made them so powerful during its peak political power. Last time we checked in with Bernal, he was a young high schooler living in a *corral* on the Westside. Since then Bernal graduated from high school, served in the waning years of World War II, and returned home to San Antonio. He obtained a degree in sociology from Trinity University and used the G.I. Bill to purchase his first home on the outer edges of the Westside because there were simply “no homes” available in his old neighborhood according to his recollection. Indeed, Bernal mentioned that even if there were houses for sale on the West Side, he was not able to find a favorable 4.5 percent rate in that neighborhood—presumably from the G.I. Bill or FHA.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rosales, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Joe J. Bernal Interview, Interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University (<https://crbb.tcu.edu/>). Hereafter cited as CRBB interview.

At the time of this writing, the Bernal interview is not up on the CRBB website. A copy of the original interview is in the possession of the author.

While Bernal may have left the Westside, he never left the community. He taught elementary school first in Wilson County which was just to the southeast of San Antonio between 1950-1951. From there he spent the next thirteen years teaching on the Westside, first at Burleson Elementary for three years and then at Crockett Elementary for ten years. Bernal also volunteered at the Guadalupe Center and at the Mexican Christian Institute. He taught English and citizenship classes to what he described as *viejitos* (elderly people). And he coached various sports for the children at both places. Bernal never forgot where he came from and spent a good part of his life giving back to his community.<sup>29</sup>

During his time as a student at Trinity University, Bernal supported the municipal reform drive.<sup>30</sup> In his recollection, he liked the idea of a manager-council form of government for personal reasons. Bernal did not get along with the commissioner who represented the Westside, Jimmy Knight. Knight was a local Democratic Party chair, member of the liberal, multiracial Bexar County Democratic Coalition, and had connections that dated back to the machine. Bernal stated that one reason he disliked Knight was because “he looked down on us and I didn’t appreciate that.”<sup>31</sup> Whatever reason Bernal personally disliked Knight, he clearly remembered him as the commissioner for the West Side. And, for Bernal, his experience with Knight seemed

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<sup>29</sup> Joe Bernal Interview, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>30</sup> During the interview, Bernal states that he joined the Good Government League—a card carrying member—when he was at Trinity University because of the plan to shift to council-manager form of government. But, as noted, the GGL did not actually coalesce as an organization until 1955 well after the new charter passed. He likely meant that he volunteered with the precursor organization, the Council-Manager Association. Because of the predominance of the GGL during this time period, it is easy to understand how one might conflate different organizations that essentially merged at a later date.

<sup>31</sup> It is not clear who the “us” is to which Bernal refers in the interview. Given that the Bexar County Democratic Coalition (BCDC) was comprised of liberals such as Albert Peña, he might have meant that Knight looked down on Bernal because he sided with the GGL in the municipal fight given Knight’s position within the old machine. According to Rosales in *Illusion of Inclusion*, the BCDC understood the GGL as synonymous with Republicans at that time.

to make him want to support the council-manager coalition. It could also be that some commissioners in the Democratic party machine treated their areas as small fiefdoms and the council-manager system would also democratize, at least in theory, that political position in the form of a council representation. The important point is that Bernal did not join the municipal reform movement for ideological reasons. He joined out of a sense of fairness and seemed to earnestly believe that the council-manager system was more democratic and a far better alternative than the previous strong mayor-commissioner system. But other than a stint as a precinct chairman, Bernal did not formally participate in Democratic Party politics. Thus, it was a shock when six to eight representatives of the Westside GGL reached out to Bernal in the early 1960s and suggested he run for state representative.<sup>32</sup>

Bernal recalled that he knew the men from the Westside GGL who approached from social gatherings and because they were friends and often bought shirts for the teams he coached at the Guadalupe Center. Without naming names, although it seems clear that Westside GGL founder Alfred Vasquez was part of the delegation because Bernal described one of them as a “finance guy” and Vasquez worked as a stock broker, Bernal described the group as “conservative *mexicanos*. Elderly. Businessmen.” At first Bernal expressed reservations about running on a GGL ticket. Emphatically, and repeatedly during the interview, he stated to us that he told them: “I’m not part of their organization (the GGL). I’m liberal and they’re conservative. I’m progressive and they’re conservative.” Bernal went on to explain, “you know me and I know you guys, but I’m not a conservative person and I’m going to be my own person when I get there and if you’re willing to take me that way, fine.” This is an interesting interchange between

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<sup>32</sup> Bernal Interview, June 2016, CRBB interview.

Bernal and the delegation from the Westside GGL. Bernal seems to want to hammer home that he will not be beholden to the GGL line. He wanted to be his “own person.” This suggests a lot of inner turmoil as Bernal mulled over his decision. Did he see the GGL, like many on the Westside, as part of a conservative bloc of businessmen who cared little for the plight of the people on the Westside? Did he see them all as Republicans as the members of the liberal Bexar County Democratic Coalition? Or was this retelling a way to distance, subconsciously or otherwise, himself from an organization that has not fared well in terms of historical scrutiny and community perception? It is difficult to tell, but it is perhaps some combination of the three. Bernal was a liberal politician, but he was not ideological in the early years.

What is particularly interesting about this anecdote is not necessarily Bernal’s self-definition or even his politics but what that says about how the GGL was perceived in San Antonio’s West Side. In his book, Rosales has a throwaway line without much explanation. Rosales states, “Anonymity was preferred [by members of the Westside GGL] because of their business interest in the *barrio*. Until 1969, when an unknown source provided a list to the newspapers, no public list of its membership ever existed.”<sup>33</sup> In the late 1960s, there was a real rift between radical Chicano activists and the older generation who some deemed as *vendidos* (sellouts).<sup>34</sup> It seems likely that the disconnect between young Chicano activists and that of middle class conservative members of the West Side GGL were so bad that they feared reprisal

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<sup>33</sup> Rosales, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> The details of the feud between some Chicano radicals, and Joe Bernal, and Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez, a former independent city councilman—someone who even the GGL would not challenge, are not necessarily relevant for our purposes except to say that things got personal between Gonzalez and many Chicano activists. They traded insults in the papers, at rallies, in cartoons, and, in one instance, a brief physical altercation erupted between Henry B.’s aide and Willie and George Velásquez during a speech at St. Mary’s University in February 1970. The details can be found in David Montejano, *Quixote’s Soliders: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 109.

of some sort for “conspiring” with the McAllister’s GGL. Nevertheless, Bernal made clear that because he was from the Westside, no one ever questioned his authenticity or membership on the GGL ticket. “I could go to different places [on the Westside] and I could feel at home,” Bernal stated. “ They didn’t have a lot of questions about why are you [with the] GGL.”<sup>35</sup>

The other interesting aspect of Bernal’s meeting with the West Side GGL is that Bernal stated clearly that he was a political neophyte who did not know how to raise money for political purposes. All he remembers them saying is that “We will help you.” The West Side GGL delegation’s response is crucial to understanding how they wielded power for so long and so effectively in San Antonio. Being on a GGL slate did not just mean you would get your photo taken in the paper. But that mattered because the *San Antonio Express* ran regular pro-GGL editorials. But it went further. The GGL took care of fundraising for its candidates including expenses that would come up during the campaign such as political signs and announcements. According to Bernal all he had to do was “politick.” The GGL even introduced him to people in other areas of town but Bernal focused solely on the Westside during his campaign. He won his race in a landslide.<sup>36</sup>

#### **4.5 Urban Renewal and The Campaign for HemisFair ‘68**

Like other cities across the nation, San Antonio used urban renewal as a means to revitalize aspects of the city with substandard housing and concentrated poverty. By 1950, the ethnic Mexican population was 160,518 of a total population of 408,442 (39.3%). In 1960, that number increased to 243,903 of a total population of 587,718 (41.5%). From 1970 onward, Mexican

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<sup>35</sup> Bernal Interview, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Americans would comprise over 50% of the entire population of San Antonio.<sup>37</sup> Many of them lived in the *barrio* that urban renewal would target for slum clearance. While the Housing Act of 1949 ostensibly created more public housing, it continued a trend that was seen in the previous iteration: slum clearance. Local municipal governments and developers used slum clearance and urban renewal to recreate entire landscapes for their version of progress. In San Antonio, this meant that the GGL could essentially do what it wanted because it held all the levers of power between 1950-1975 approximately. Their largest urban renewal project was HemisFair which would transform the downtown corridor into a tourist mecca. HemisFair was intended to be San Antonio's official "coming out" party, and urban renewal paved the way.

U.S. Representative Henry B. González first imagined San Antonio as the host site for the first World's Fair in the U.S. Southwest. González began his political career serving as the first Mexican American city councilman in San Antonio in 1953, as an independent, then as a state senator in 1956. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1961 where he remained until health complications forced him to retire in 1998. Politically, González was a staunch liberal when it came to issues surrounding civil rights. In 1957, as a Texas senator, González gained some notoriety for leading a thirty-six hour filibuster in the Texas capitol to block the passage of segregationist legislation that attempted to thwart the *Brown v. Board* (1954) decision to integrate schools. Once in national office, González never forgot the community he went to Washington to represent. He was determined to bring attention to his

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<sup>37</sup> Rosales, 11.

district with his 20<sup>th</sup> century plan for the 20<sup>th</sup> district. HemisFair would represent one of his efforts.<sup>38</sup>

Shortly after entering national office, González telephoned local San Antonio businessman Bill Sinkin about the possibility of hosting San Antonio hosting the fair. González wanted to use the fair to promote trade and commerce between San Antonio and Latin America, especially Mexico. If Sinkin could generate support within the local business community, González argued he could secure federal participation and funding. For four years, a coalition of business leaders in San Antonio met every Tuesday morning at 7:30 to ensure that they progress towards HemisFair was made.<sup>39</sup> By 1963, San Antonio Fair Inc. (SAF) had collected over 7.5 million dollars in underwriting guarantees for preopening expenses and, in 1964, the voters of San Antonio overwhelmingly passed a 30-million-dollar bond election for the fair. Because the fair would be held on 92.5 acres of land near the central business district, SAF brokered a deal with the city in which the city would lease the land to SAF for the duration of the fair, but it would relinquish control of the land to the city after the closing ceremonies. This allowed SAF and the city to merge an existing urban renewal project with HemisFair that would offset the cost of the fair's construction, a perfect reason to host the fair inside the downtown corridor.<sup>40</sup> With

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<sup>38</sup> David Montejano, *Quixote's Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 214; Martin Donnel Kohout, "Henry Barbosa Gonzalez," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgo76>.

<sup>39</sup> Sterlin Holmesly, *HemisFair '68 and the Transformation of San Antonio* (San Antonio: Maverick Publishing Co., 2003), 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Bill Sinkin to Congress, "U.S. Participation in HemisFair 1968 Exposition," *United States House of Representatives, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, August 19, 1965. Hereafter cited HemisFair Congressional Hearing.

the money in place, all that was left for SAF boosters was to continue its breakneck pace of construction and sell HemisFair to the world.



Figure 4.1: Architectural Rendering of the HemisFair '68 Site.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> HemisFair Grounds, San Antonio Fair Inc., Records, 1962-1995 (Bulk 1964-1968), MS 31, Box 318, Folder Urban Renewal Two, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections. Hereafter cited SAF Records.

The urban renewal program of which HemisFair was attached would radically alter the shape and nature of the downtown corridor. Since the passage of the federal Housing Act of 1949, San Antonio politicians used public housing and urban renewal as a mechanism to clear “blighted” land in areas of San Antonio. Although San Antonio applied for federal funding, state politics effectively prohibited San Antonio authorities from enacting widespread urban renewal. Nevertheless, local San Antonio business and civic leaders and their like-minded supporters across the state continually lobbied the Texas legislature to approval legislation to allow urban renewal to take place. It was the confluence of lobbying efforts and, most importantly for the San Antonio case, the creation of the conservative Government League (GGL), which enabled urban renewal to proceed in San Antonio through an amendment in the Texas legislature in May 1957.<sup>42</sup> The scale of the project would remake the downtown corridor, expand the Paseo del Rio (Riverwalk), and displace hundreds of San Antonio residents from all backgrounds: German, Polish, *mexicanos*, and African American.

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<sup>42</sup> Robert B. Fairbanks, “The Texas Exception: San Antonio and Urban Renewal, 1949-1965,” *The Journal of Planning History* 2 (May 2002): 186-188. The GGL, established in 1954, was a group of mostly Anglo and political leaders that effectively controlled San Antonio politics for nearly twenty years. The social and political elite that comprised the GGL had a stranglehold on nominations to city council and ensured that candidates adhered to their philosophy which “defined growth and expansion as the only legitimate community-wide issues. These issues reflected the municipal reform movement’s narrow view of local government as a business enterprise” (Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000: 34).

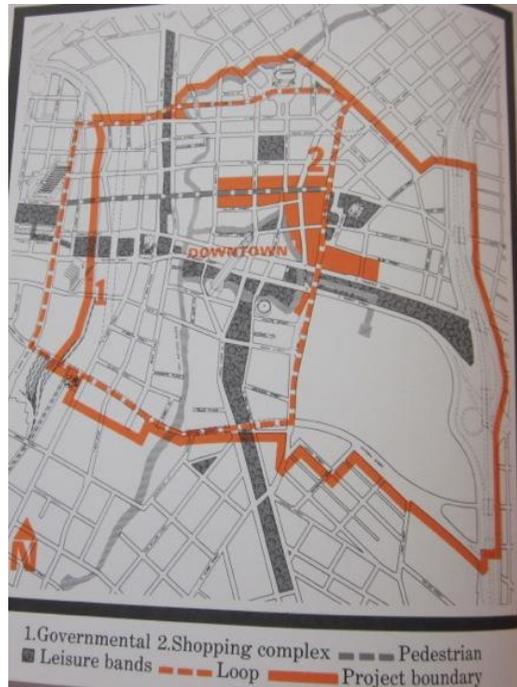


Figure 4.2: San Antonio's Urban Renewal Project, 1950s-1960s.<sup>43</sup>

The amended law in 1957 that allowed cities to proceed with urban renewal projects did not give city officials carte blanche. State law required that the city hold both a public hearing and a citywide referendum on any proposed urban renewal projects.<sup>44</sup> In order to sell their plan to the residents of San Antonio, the Urban Renewal Agency of San Antonio (URASA) created a marketing campaign to “educate” San Antonians of the benefits of urban renewal. In an undated booklet entitled *Cities are Dynamic*, likely targeted to both individual residents and business leaders, URASA presented urban renewal in as benign a light as possible. “Relocation: Rehabilitation or redevelopment of a blighted area will often displace a substantial number of

<sup>43</sup> Urban Renewal Agency of San Antonio, *Cities are Dynamic*, SAF Records, Box 363, Urban Renewal Agency folder. Hereinafter cited *Cities are Dynamic*.

<sup>44</sup> Fairbanks, “The Texas Exception,” 189.

families and business concerns. The rehousing [sic] of these families and the relocation of these businesses is a major aspect of the urban renewal program. . . . Relocation, therefore, also involves the referral of families to other agencies and services for public assistance, medical help, or job placement.”<sup>45</sup> By using words like “relocation” and offering to aid displaced families and relocate businesses, URASA downplayed the psychological cost many residents likely faced while forced to move from their homes, especially the elderly. Moreover, the booklet itself contains few facts about urban renewal itself. Instead, the reader is given pictures to help convey the message that urban renewal was “*a city’s only tool to correct the mistakes of the past.*”<sup>46</sup>

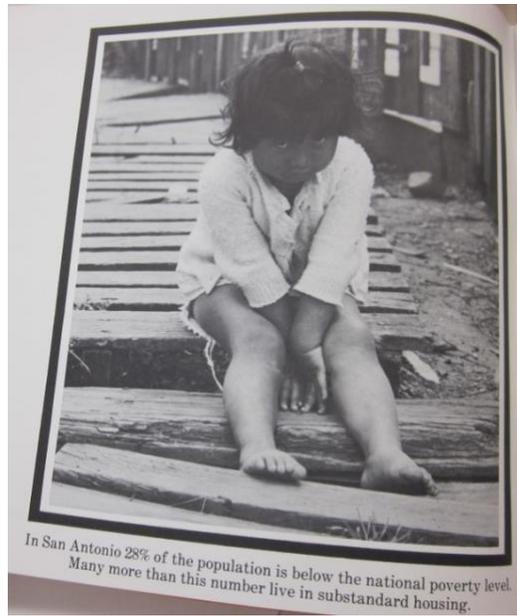
First, developers had to sell urban renewal to the residents of San Antonio, so they hired a public relations firm. State law required that the city hold both a public hearing and a citywide referendum on any proposed urban renewal projects.<sup>47</sup> The booklet began by showing the reader the problem. In one image, a disheveled, barefoot, Mexican American girl sits on a wooden platform wearing little else than a shift. She sheepishly looks up to the camera as if to suggest she needs the viewer’s help. In a second image, dilapidated buildings and ramshackle housing structures, more like shacks than homes, surround the same girl.

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<sup>45</sup> *Cities are Dynamic.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis original.

<sup>47</sup> Fairbanks, “The Texas Exception,” 189.



*Figure 4.3: Photo of mexicana Sitting on Boardwalk.<sup>48</sup>*



*Figure 4.4: Mexicana Walking on Makeshift Boardwalk.<sup>49</sup>*

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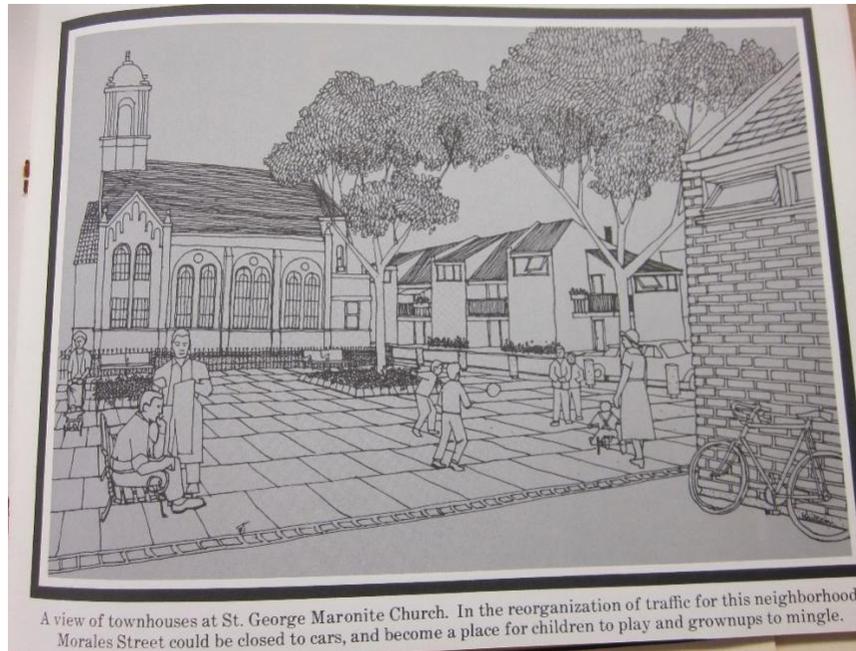
<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

In this racialized image, one gets the sense that she represents both the problem and the cure. On the one hand, the ways in which race is deeply embedded in urban space, criminality, delinquency, and poverty—many of the same reasons why middle-class Anglos began to move away from the downtown area in the first place—are cognitively mapped onto place. San Antonians began to associate specific areas with racialized notions of urban decay, which were only reinforced by documents from people in power such as the URASA. This little girl (and the only other person of color depicted in the booklet lounging in front of a boarded up shop), then, became the face of urban blight. On the other hand, she also represented a means to engender middle class Anglo San Antonians paternalism because they had it in their power to save her. By voting for urban renewal, white San Antonians's could help create a better world for the little girl. It is telling that the URASA never named the little girl. They did not really need her, just her image for the booklet. A prop to be used and discarded once she served her purpose.

In the pages that follow, the voter was encouraged to see the type of future urban renewal could make possible. The reader saw presumably Anglo children playing in a courtyard in front of a church with a row of townhouses across the walkway. The entire street has been closed off to automobile traffic to give the children more recreational space. Unlike the image of the impoverished young girl, sitting in filth, the creators of this image project a sense of leisure. Text underneath the picture give voice to this urban renewal creates a “place for children to play and grownups to mingle.” In addition to notions of white middle class respectability—all the people in the drawing appear to be white—and social mobility, the viewer is meant to see how

urban renewal fosters a type of community anathema to the racialized space in the previous photo.<sup>50</sup>

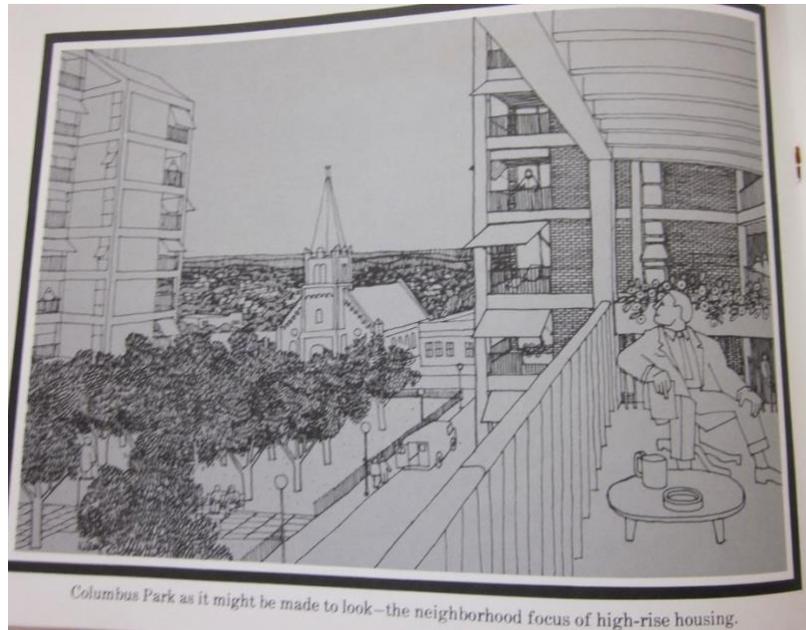


*Figure 4.5: Urban Renewal and Play.*<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



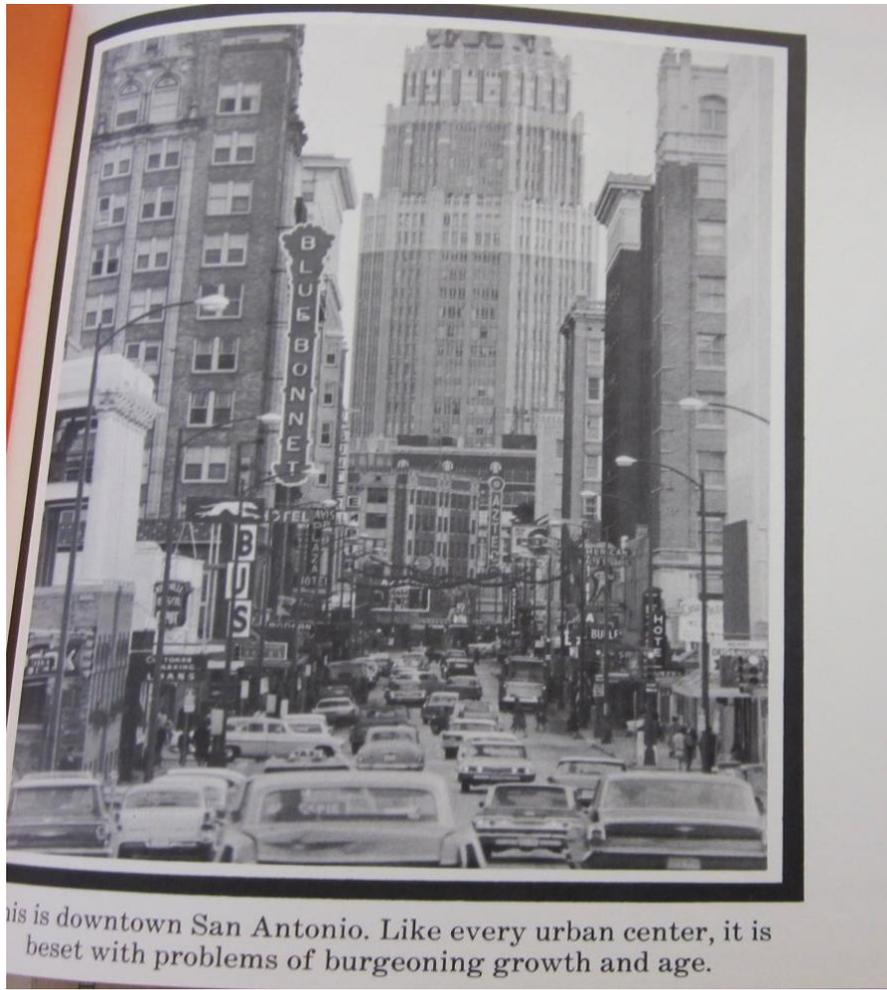
*Figure 4.6: Urban Renewal and the View from Above.*<sup>52</sup>

Even notions of home took a back seat to the real motivating factor behind this idyllic vision of urban renewal, consumer-oriented tourism. Pictures of traffic congestion in the downtown corridor gave way to areas in which people congregate around consumer culture. The narrow streets in which buildings loom press upon the viewer are replaced with wider, tree-lined, avenues. “Shopping areas will provide easy pedestrian access to downtown,” one caption read.<sup>53</sup> See Figure 4-7 and 4-8.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

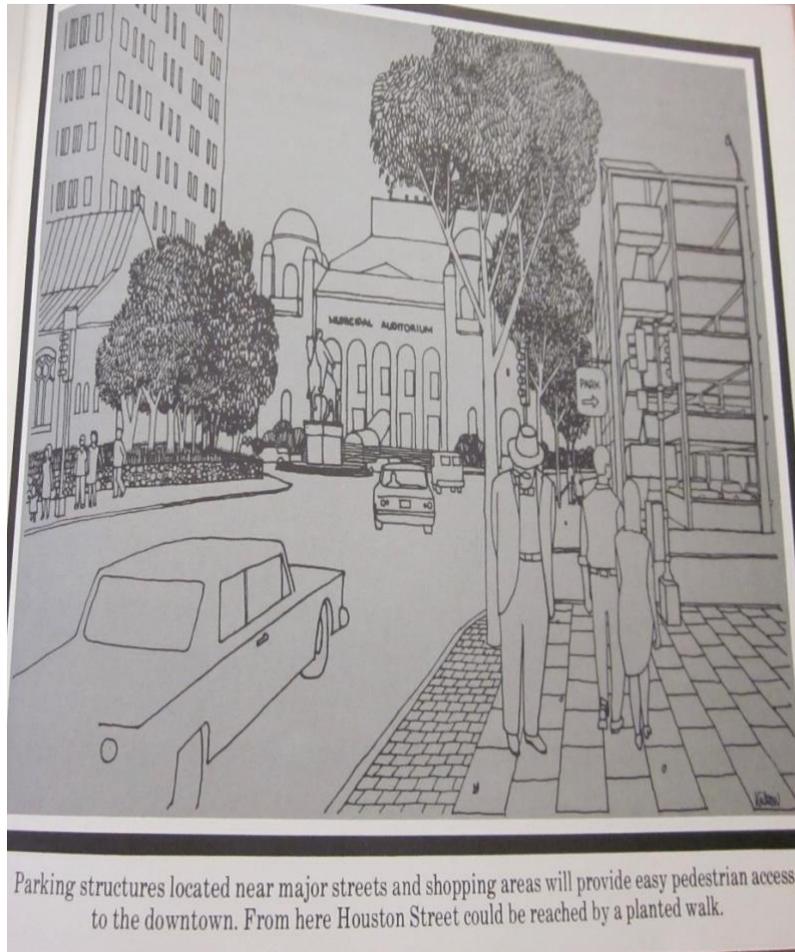
<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 4.7: Congested San Antonio Street.*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



*Figure 4.8: Tree-lined Streets.*<sup>55</sup>

Along the newly renovated Paseo Del Rio, families and tourists alike walk down its concrete shores or perhaps take a leisurely boat ride in the Venetian-style gondolas down the San Antonio River. Lining the river, visitors would have easy access to the shops, stalls, and restaurants in the newly remodeled downtown corridor. One gets the sense that the URASA sold not only dreams of an idyllic urban setting, but also the benefits of a middle class lifestyle defined by its relationship to consumerism. A familiar narrative of American progress is interwoven throughout

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

the booklet: urban blight has been overcome, or perhaps more accurately, been rendered invisible by technological innovations only made possible through urban renewal. The URASA was not simply selling a standard renovation project but a new type of middle-class lifestyle.

By the time HemisFair began to take shape, city boosters had already made the hard sell. Indeed, attaching HemisFair to an urban renewal project already well underway helped smooth over concerns of its necessity and the expense such a fair would generate. By 1968, when this phase of urban renewal wound down, URASA had transformed the downtown corridor. Through urban renewal, the city elite managed to sanitize the downtown corridor by replacing blight with commercial spaces that played upon themes associated with San Antonio's Spanish past for tourist consumption. Modern San Antonio emerged at the expense of the multicultural residents who formally occupied these spaces. According to one scholar, city elites removed 274 families, German, Mexican American, Polish, and African American, from the urban renewal zone simply because those families occupied commercially profitable spaces.<sup>56</sup> In addition to reshaping the downtown corridor the urban renewal project also hardened the contours of the West Side *barrio* of which the downtown corridor is adjacent. Mexican American families living in those areas slotted for destruction had to move somewhere. The urban renewal project, then, not only "revitalized" the central business district making it more suitable for San Antonio's postwar tourist economy but, at least in part, also helped harden the racialized contours of the *barrio*. Given the highly racialized nature of the housing market and segregated nature of the city itself during the 1960s, many of these displaced families had literally nowhere else to turn; they were literally pushed out of the business district into the *barrio*.

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<sup>56</sup> Fairbanks, "The Texas Exception," 192.

In conjunction with securing a site to house the fair, making HemisFair a reality depended upon the support of the local community, business elites, and, of course, the millions of tourists who visited San Antonio during its six month operation. In January 1964, the city held a thirty-million-dollar bond proposal, which passed in each precinct of the city. Rep. Henry B. González argued that “Never before has a community supported any one issue as enthusiastically and as solidly as this. It cuts across all sections of the community. Every single group, whether it is political, economic, social, has joined this venture.”<sup>57</sup> In the week before San Antonio would vote on the bond issue, SAF and the city created a promotional video to help sell the fair to the city. Executive Vice President of SAF and manager of the 1962 Seattle “Century 21” World’s Fair, Ewan Dingwall, spoke directly to the citizens of San Antonio about the benefits such a fair would bring. He insisted that San Antonio direly needed the convention center proposed in the thirty-million-dollar bond issue because it would generate an important and long-lasting revenue stream for the city. In other words, the fair would not be a fly-by-night operation but would have enduring economic significance for the community.<sup>58</sup>

The idea of creating sustainable economic growth based on a tourist economy created the impetus for the exhibition. Dingwall argued that “new markets are south of the Rio Grande . . . the wave of the future is rolling up from the south . . . where will it break?”<sup>59</sup> SAF members were the top business leaders in San Antonio. For them, opening up markets in Latin America would bolster not only the city’s international reputation but also materially benefit those most

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<sup>57</sup> Henry B. González, “U.S. Participation in HemisFair 1968 Exposition,” U.S. House of Representatives, Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, August 19, 1965

<sup>58</sup> Carol A. Keller, “HemisFair ’68 and the Cultural Matrix of San Antonio,” unpublished paper, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Quote from Keller.

closely associated with the fair. For instance, one of the largest donors to the initial underwriting campaigns was local construction magnate H.B. “Pat” Zachry. He served on the SAF board and later as CEO when the company experienced financial difficulties during its initial months of operation. Although Zachry refused to bid on HemisFair projects because of concerns about potential conflict of interests, this did not stop the Zachry from building the Palacio Del Rio Hotel. Built in a record 200 days in time for the HemisFair grand opening, the location of the hotel on the Riverwalk, a concrete pathway along the San Antonio river that cuts through downtown, would ensure that it would meet the demand for hotel space for the thousands of tourists entering the city for the fair and beyond.<sup>60</sup> That those most involved with the fairs also sought to benefit from its success is perhaps not surprising; however, the marketing campaign in which they used to sell the city to the world played upon discursive tropes of American exceptionalism and myths of inclusivity that masked the severe economic and racial inequality that existed in the city.

HemisFair promoters strategically used the image of San Antonio as a bicultural place to promote the interests of the elite and played upon tropes of a whitewashed version of San Antonio history to draw in tourists. The Chamber of Commerce created a visitors guided titled “HemisFair ’68. In a Setting of Old World Charm: San Antonio,” that detailed the major tourist destinations within driving distance of the metropolitan area. The first stop on the tour was the Alamo, in which the reader saw an iconic photo of the Alamo illuminated in the predawn light. The text, “Downtown Walk through History and Romance,” prefaced the Alamo’s brief historical section. Creating a simplistic narrative, the author was quick to point out that “this famous chapel [the Alamo] stands in solemn tribute to the 188 immortal heroes who gave their

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<sup>60</sup> Keller, 10.

lives for Texas freedom.” One could then visit San Fernando Cathedral “where Jim Bowie was married in 1824, and the Alamo heroes are said to repose.” The Alamo and the Texas defenders are placed upon a pedestal, bastions of liberty and sacrifice. The Alamo itself is rendered in such a fashion that the light shining off its walls gives it a majestic, almost ethereal quality, as if the ground itself is hallowed.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, this narrative of the Alamo in which Texas defenders sacrificed everything for liberty was common to many Americans. Anthropologist Richard Flores argues, “At every stage of its preservation and reproduction, the Alamo served a semantic purpose, not always unified in historical or social content but nearly always as a means of influencing, selecting, and containing various semantic postures of the dominant.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, although Davy Crockett and the other defenders lost their lives during the 1836 siege, the memory and meaning of their last stand lived on through the reproduction of the Alamo myth as a site and symbol of American liberty and courage. The popular memory of the battle was also inflected by fictionalized accounts in film such as John Wayne’s widely popular 1960 film, *The Alamo*. This film depicts the defenders as heroes who, despite insurmountable odds, against a racialized foreign army, gallantly gave their lives in the defense of liberty and Texan independence.<sup>63</sup>

Flores demonstrates how the Alamo myth served to construct cultural understandings of difference. In this reading, Anglos saw Mexicans as racialized “Others” in Texas’s transformation towards a capitalist economy over the course of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, “HemisFair ’68. In a Setting of Old World Charm: San Antonio,” circa 1968. In possession of author. Hereinafter cited Chamber of Commerce pamphlet.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

century while the defenders are elevated to heroic proportions. Moreover, “‘remembering the Alamo’ – consists of signifying a radical difference between ‘Anglos’ and ‘Mexicans’ so as to cognize and codify the social relations circulating at the beginning of the twentieth century.” In short, this construction of the Alamo myth helped define winners and losers, Mexicans and Texans, each of which is premised upon a racialized understanding of difference and power. In twentieth century social relations, Anglos were now read as dominant while *mexicanness* was associated with stigma and “Otherness.”<sup>64</sup>

HemisFair promoters also reified a power hierarchy that relegated Mexican Americans to the margins of society, building on this discursive framing of San Antonio history as a space in which *mexicanness* became a tool to promote the city’s diversity. As tourists left majestic Alamo pictured in the Chamber of Commerce brochure, they could once again visit sites of “old world charm” by driving to the old Spanish missions that dot the metropolitan landscape. The reader was informed that, “Mission San Jose [was] established in 1720. America’s most complete mission complex, its exquisite church, homes of the Indians, workshops, granary, and mill are excellently preserved.” Pictured above the text is a woman, ostensibly Mexican or Indian, wearing an 18<sup>th</sup> century-style green dress with a white apron seated over wooden cylindrical container banded by iron. She holds a wooden rod that emerges from the top of the container. The reader gets the sense that she is manually grinding grist into flour. Absent is any notion of technological advances that have made such practices obsolete. For the reader, part of

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<sup>64</sup> Flores, xvi, 21, 11.

the appeal of San Antonio is the chance to voyeuristically partake in old world culture, much like the gristmill of which the woman of color is slaving over is a relic from the past.<sup>65</sup>

The page opposite showed a young, dashing Mexican American man wearing a pink buttoned up shirt playing a guitar. Standing above a riverbed, he serenades his beautiful Mexican American girlfriend. Her hair is long and straight, and she is wearing a multicolored dress prominent for 1960s fashion. At first glance, this might be meant to highlight the bucolic nature of San Antonio where one could languidly stroll along the river and listen to, or play, music. Yet, read against the backdrop of contemporary power relations in the city, an alternative reading might suggest something a little less leisurely. In almost every picture in which a Mexican American is readily identifiable, they are pictured in a service sector type position whereas many of the Anglos similarly pictured are from the vantage of the family tourists entering these spaces in which they can partake in “authentic” old world culture. Read this way, then, perhaps the Mexican American man playing the guitar is not simply relaxing with his female companion along the San Antonio River but, instead, the Chamber of Commerce played off of stereotypes of the Latin lover. Popularized in Hollywood by actors such as Ricardo Montalban and Desi Arnaz, images of the Latin lover exude eroticism and exoticism.<sup>66</sup> For tourists coming to San Antonio, they too could partake in this highly sexualized and romanticized aspect of San Antonio life. One could imagine themselves sitting on the edge of the tranquil San Antonio River being serenaded by a handsome young Mexican American man. At the same time, however, Anglo tourists would be comforted by the fact that this was all part

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<sup>65</sup> Chamber of Commerce pamphlet.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Ramirez Berg, *Latinos Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002): 75.

of San Antonio's old world charm, its allure, but also part of its shtick. In each image on the brochure, white families could view Mexico's static culture from a safe distance, merely observers. They could freely move into and out of these spaces without fear. The young man was, after all, serenading his young *Latina* love. The Chamber of Commerce established clear boundaries that conformed to the color line of the 1960s. These images are meant to entice, perhaps titillate, but the fundamental principles of societal norms remain in place. Mexican Americans serviced the Anglo tourists who remained in control of the relationship because of the monetary aspect each transaction engendered. Mexican Americans relied on the capital that white tourists brought in, not the other way around.

As if to reinforce this distinction, pictured below the young couple, the brochure highlights San Antonio's other main source of economic prosperity: the military. If, in this brochure, *mexicanness* embodied a static culture premised upon tropes of otherness and old worldly charm, Anglo culture is represented in technological innovation and militarism. The first image one sees is a white lab technician, wearing a white coat, working on the fuselage of a large aircraft housed in some sort of hangar bay. He is part of the "School of Aerospace Medicine and the Aerospace Medical Division" of Brooks AFB, working to ensure the safety of military professionals fighting in Vietnam. Next to this image is a photo of a long-range bomber housed at Kelly AFB. Underneath this image is the backbone of the United States' arsenal of democracy, enlisted personnel being trained at Lackland AFB. Lackland was (and remains) a training facility whose explicit purpose was to transform civilians into military-minded men and women. All of the images in the brochure contrast sharply with the old world charm-style depictions of Mexican Americans. In each instance, with the exception of one African American in uniform, all military personnel pictured are white men, in positions of power and authority.

While Anglo tourists could lounge around the Paseo Del Rio (Riverwalk) and voyeuristically partake in the charm of Old-World Mexico, they would never forget that they remained in the United States. Their safety, then, was assured by the presence of U.S. military might.

Technological innovations were the products of white U.S. innovation and culture, while the backwardness of Mexican culture could be seen as quaint and part of a bygone area only to be viewed through the lens of tourism, as if on display in a museum. The image one is left with conveyed a clear sense of U.S. superiority, buttressed by its technological innovations, and secured by the strength of its military.<sup>67</sup>

In another image, the chamber of commerce highlighted another way for Anglo tourists explore San Antonio's ethnic heritage: mariachi. In this image, an attractive Mexican American woman wearing a low-cut burgundy dress adorned with floral patterns. In her hair she wears a matching burgundy flower with matching beaded necklace. She sits on the ledge of a fountain dipping her hand into the water to remove some sort of flower floating on the water. From the brochure's description the reader is informed that this is the Spanish Governors' Palace, "a luxurious mid-1700 home" whose "10 rooms, magnificent patio, and antique furnishings are faithfully restored." Tourists can visit this space for a mere fifteen cents for adults and five cents for children. The three Mexican American men pictured in the background. Each man wears traditional mariachi garb: a white sombrero, a professional suit and what appear to be ties or perhaps ascots, and multicolored serape.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, the mariachis also wear gun belts equipped with a six shooter. This reifies the trope that Mexicans are somehow less modern and more violent than their Anglo neighbors. Yet, one does not get the sense that these men

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<sup>67</sup> Chamber of Commerce pamphlet.

<sup>68</sup> A serape is long shawl or blanket.

represent dangerous bandidos such as Pancho Villa who threatened U.S. sovereignty in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, this image is depoliticized and fits with Flores' "Texas modern" tradition. The Mexican Americans are denuded of any agency; they are simply there to serve the needs of San Antonio's tourist economy. The woman smiles for the viewer with her arm outstretched suggesting an invitation. The men are pictured in the background, almost as props, smiling as they strum their musical instruments as they serenade the handsome woman.<sup>69</sup> Not only has the Chamber of Commerce depoliticized the Mexican Americans pictured in their brochure, they have rendered an important tradition and musical culture invisible. In the text that follows the image, the brochure only mentions a brief description of the Spanish Governors' Palace, nowhere does the author attempt to historicize the woman and men used to promote this tourist venue.

HemisFair also had its detractors, especially from the younger generation. Young *mexicanos* understood that city leaders used their cultural heritage to encourage tourism in San Antonio while economic inequality was rife within the city. In a statement entered as testimony to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in December of 1968, a group of *mexicanos* argued, "Tourists coming to our city and other not from this locality are misled into believing that all we do is play guitars and sing songs by the river, happy with our station in life, such is not the case. We have serious problems requiring serious study, action, and assistance."<sup>70</sup> The discursive framing of San Antonio as a city that embraced its bicultural heritage rendered invisible the

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<sup>69</sup> Chamber of Commerce pamphlet.

<sup>70</sup> Mexican-American Neighborhood Civic Organization, Barrios Unidos, et al., "Exhibit No. 55: Statement from Various Community Organizations," United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights: Hearings Held in San Antonio Texas*, December 9-14, 1968, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1969). Hereinafter USCCR.

discrimination, poverty, and lack of economic opportunity in the Mexican American community. Instead of truly embracing the spirit of its multiethnic foundations, city business leaders merely created a façade that ultimately fell short of its goals and perpetuated racialized stereotypes about a community many of these same leaders likely infrequently visited and, based upon their actions, did not care for so long as the economic growth and prosperity benefited the business community.

#### **4.6 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and *Hunger in America***

Two months after HemisFair ceased operations, a federal government agency known as the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) came to San Antonio. From December 9 – December 14, 1968, the USCCR met to discuss the impact racism and discrimination in the U.S. affected Mexican Americans in the Southwest. Established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, part of the duties of the USCCR was to act as an independent, apolitical agency to investigate allegations of voter disfranchisement, gather data on instances of equal protection violations, to determine the efficacy of Federal laws and policies concerning the equal protection of laws, to serve as a clearinghouse for reports of civil rights violations, and to investigate allegations of voter fraud in Federal elections.<sup>71</sup> Mexican American social justice advocates across the Southwest were pleased that the federal government recognized the need to hold such hearings focused exclusively on the Mexican American community for the first time in the USCCR's history. For the length of the five-day hearing, Mexican American's and their allies offered testimony concerning the abridgement of their civil rights across the Southwest, but given its location, many of the testimonials came from San Antonio residents.

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<sup>71</sup> Chairman Hannah, "Opening Remarks and Proceedings," December 9, 1968, USCCR.

The irony of the entire situation could not have been lost on Mexican American residents. In the years leading up to the opening of HemisFair, the white business elite attempted to paint San Antonio as a racially progressive, model Southwestern city. In his testimony to the panel, Mayor Walter McAllister argued that “the city of San Antonio has led the way in the elimination of discrimination against individuals or groups by reason of race, creed, color, or national origin. This was done long before the fair employment practices act was adopted.” Speaking specifically about a committee commissioned to advise the council on creating an ordinance eliminating segregation in public facilities, the McAllister said, “On May 23, 1963, the committee reported all community facilities such as schools, recreation, and public transportation were completely desegregated. It was their opinion that immediate desegregation of privately-owned and publicly-used facilities was a necessity. It was the unanimous recommendation of the committee that complete desegregation of these facilities be achieved under an accelerated program of voluntary action rather than by an ordinance. . . . On June 22, 1963 the council’s committee reported that nearly 100 percent of the facilities had been desegregated. Voluntary desegregation was show to be workable.”<sup>72</sup>

The picture Mayor McAllister painted of San Antonio was that of a city where the civic and political leaders cared deeply about every one of its residents, including people of color. After all, the San Antonio business community and local government voluntarily desegregated public and private facilities without the need of coercive measures from the municipal government. “San Antonio has made consistent efforts to improve conditions in the area of

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<sup>72</sup> Walter McAllister, “Statement of Hon. Walter McAllister, Mayor of San Antonio, Texas,” December 11, 1968, USCCR.

human relations,” McAllister forcefully argued, “San Antonio has always been a concerned community, and certainly the city administration has been concerned.”<sup>73</sup>

To prove San Antonio’s progressive character, the mayor then began to cite evidence of inclusion. He submitted that over half the employees working for the municipal government had Spanish surnames. Two city directors and two of the four judges of the municipal court were also *mexicanos*. Moreover, in terms of housing, the mayor suggested, “In the years immediately following World War II, it was rare indeed to find Mexican Americans living in other residential areas than on the West Side of San Antonio. Mexican Americans now live in every area of the city, including the most exclusive.” In the incorporated cities that surrounded San Antonio, “such as Alamo Heights, Castle Hills, Olmos Park, and Terrell Hills, what many consider the most exclusive areas, we find the following percentage of persons with Spanish surnames: Alamo Heights, 2.7 percent; Castle Hills, 3.9 percent, Olmos Park, 10.8 percent, and Terrell Hills, 4 percent.” Finally, the Mayor spoke to the work the city had done to create jobs, job training, or other economic opportunities for people of color in San Antonio. At least on paper, then, from the mayor’s standpoint, San Antonio was a model of integration.<sup>74</sup>

Yet, the testimonies presented after the mayor and the USCCR’s own evidence belied the rosy picture Mayor McAllister painted for the benefit of the official record. McAllister presented a wide variety of statistics to support his argument; however, a cursory analysis of the labor statistics drawn from the USCCR’s own staff report painted a more complicated picture than McAllister admitted. For instance, the annual median income for Mexican Americans in the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

state of Texas in 1960 was \$1,150 or 43% of white Texans.<sup>75</sup> Nearly 75% of all welfare recipients for Bexar County (of which San Antonio comprises) were Mexican American.<sup>76</sup> The Post Office, the largest federal employer in San Antonio, had a Mexican American employment rate of 40%, which was about relative to their total population in the city; however, in terms of managerial, or higher wage jobs, only 12% were held by Mexican Americans. A survey conducted by the Texas Employment Commission in February 1968 offers startling numbers. For this survey, a total of 2946 individuals were questioned. Of the 527 who listed their profession as “Managerial and Supervisory,” only fourteen were Mexican American (seven were African Americans). Of the 1606 who listed their profession as “Professional and Technical,” 118 were Mexican American (39 African American). A similar trend existed in the self-described “Clerical and Office” positions, only 90 of the 763 employees were Mexican American (37 were African American). Finally, of the 50 people working in the custodial and service industry, four were Mexican American and thirty were African American.<sup>77</sup> Clearly, then, by simply saying that over half of the municipal employees were Mexican American tells only a partial story. The Mayor selected aggregate data from the 1960 federal census to make his argument, but that cannot adequately explain what jobs Mexican Americans were working in and their level of pay. Given the racialized nature of San Antonio, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, discriminatory hiring practices still existed and affected the lives and livelihoods of the Mexican American working class. One scholar has suggested that to fully understand the statistical data presented in the census, one must take into account the local politics on the

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<sup>75</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights Staff Report, “The Mexican American Population of Texas,” Exhibit No. 8, USCCR.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights Staff Report, “Staff Report on Employment,” Exhibit No. 31, USCCR.

ground because “equal pay for equal work was simply not a reality for the Chicano community.”<sup>78</sup> Moreover, suggesting that two of the four municipal judges were Mexican American does not adequately compensate for the drastic ways in which class mattered in San Antonio. Few Mexican Americans could be considered “middle class,” a term which as Rosales points out has its own problems in the San Antonio context. The vast majority of Mexican Americans in San Antonio were either poor or working class as evidenced by the high number on public assistance.

The failure of HemisFair to generate the economic impact its proponents promised is perhaps best captured in the 1968 CBS documentary, *Hunger in America*. In this documentary, CBS investigators spent ten months researching various communities throughout the United States to report on the desperate need many communities faced; San Antonio was the first of four communities spotlighted. *Hunger in America* begins with the image of a premature Mexican American baby lying in a medical crib. A doctor placed a manual breathing apparatus over the baby’s face as he performed chest compressions on the infant who is only slightly bigger than the doctor’s hands. The doctor’s herculean efforts, however, were in vein as the malnourished baby does not take a breath on his own and dies on camera. From the baby’s death bed, the screen cuts to images of HemisFair, its monorail, the Tower of Americas, the commercial spaces, and five beautiful, healthy women (one of them is black) smiling as they perform acrobatic maneuvers on water skis to the on looking audience off camera. In the first three minutes, then, the documentarian was able to capture the hypocrisy of hosting a World’s Fair that paid tribute to San Antonio’s Spanish and Mexican heritage. However, the focus of the business elite was to

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<sup>78</sup> Rosales, 10. For a detailed breakdown of labor statistics and their meaning in the San Antonio context, see the introduction to Rosales, *Illusion of Inclusion*.

revitalize the downtown corridor while the West Side languished. The promise future prosperity in the guise of tourism meant little to the baby who died of malnourishment or the thousands of other *mexicanos* living hand to mouth in dilapidated, unsanitary housing a few miles away from the fair.<sup>79</sup>

The rest of the segment features vignettes from other *mexicanos* from the community speaking to the world about the deplorable conditions in which they lived. In the film narrator estimated that an estimated 100,000 “go hungry all the time” in the city. To illustrate the point, the correspondent spoke to one *mexicana* about her situation. He asked, “What do you tell your children when they come home and there is no food?” The *mexicana* mother of six, unable to meet the reporter’s eyes, looked down and said she told her children that “we don’t have anything to eat and we just have to lay down like that until the next day.” In another portion of the interview, Father Ruiz, a local Catholic priest from San Antonio, asks a young man if he packs a lunch when he goes to school. “No, sir,” the high school student replied. When asked if he eats anything at lunch time, the student says no. Father Ruiz then asked him if his school offered lunch. They did, but it cost “thirty-five cents” which was more than the young man could afford. Although the tenor of the tendentious and controversial documentary placed the blame squarely upon the failure of the municipal and federal government for not providing adequate funds to ameliorate the poverty in communities such as San Antonio, undergirding was structural inequality and racism that exacerbated poverty on the West Side.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Martin Carr, Peter Davis, Mili Bonsignori, William Wagner, George Silano, *Hunger in America*, CBS (New York: Carousel Films, 1968).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

In 1967, Father Ruiz worked as the director of San Antonio's Inner City Apostolate which worked with the archdiocese to provide food, clothing to the city's poor and needy. Although growing up in San Antonio, Fr. Ruiz quickly realized "I was a real phony! I came there with an affluent middle-class gospel and stood and watched all anguish of life in the Inner City but was unwilling to jump in and be human. I could no longer stand on the bank of the world in the safety of my own church."<sup>81</sup> Fr. Ruiz would become a stalwart figure in the fight against poverty in San Antonio and a social justice advocate. He received much criticism for being the spokesperson on the *Hunger in America* documentary, and he believed he was fired from his position because of political pressure from the mayor's office.<sup>82</sup> When the USCCR came to San Antonio, Fr. Ruiz presented his testimony. Much like his interview in the documentary, Fr. Ruiz blamed the municipal government for being unable or unwilling to provide a social welfare net capable of sustaining San Antonio's most needy citizens. In his testimony to the USCCR, Ruiz quotes a 1967 proposal to the model cities program that bears quoting in length. It read:

In the city, 28 per cent of the families (38,444) made less than \$3,000 per year, and over 6 per cent of the families had an income of less than \$1,000. Although the economic picture appears optimistic and growth seems to be certain, it is still true that San Antonio has more area of blight than ever before. We have before us then two San Antonio's: One, a San Antonio growing in prosperity and economic viability; the other, a *San Antonio which has grown only in the intensity of its problems*.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Richard Edward Martinez, *PADRES: The National Chicano Priest Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005): 24.

<sup>82</sup> Ralph Ruiz, "Prepared Statement of Father Ruiz Before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, San Antonio, Texas," December 9, 1968, Exhibit No. 10, USCCR.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

Here Fr. Ruiz does at least two things. First, he highlights the degree to which the present course of action did not benefit all San Antonians equally. Instead, Ruiz suggested, the economic growth practices of the municipal government have bifurcated the community along racial and class lines. The people who stood to gain the most from economic development, the working class, were instead being left behind because the focus of the project benefitted the small business elite. Secondly, in a language very similar to that of the Kerner Commission report, which President Johnson established to study urban rebellions that occurred in 1967, Fr. Ruiz attempted to reframe the discourse which read urban inequality as merely a black/white issue as an issue which affects communities of color in urban areas across the nation.<sup>84</sup> The barriers to open housing, the legacy of racial discrimination, and the limitation of educational resources for central city schools because of a dwindling tax bases—in short, the urban crisis—were products of structural forces that cut across racial and class lines and created a circular pattern of poverty in urban communities.

In the process of selling the exposition to the world, HemisFair promoters ensured that San Antonio's economic fate would be inextricably linked a serviced based economy that rarely materially benefitted the wage laborer. Instead of thinking broadly about developing industry which could provide high wage, high productivity jobs, working class San Antonians were largely left with jobs that required one to service the tourist. Texas governor John Connally once said of HemisFair that it “turned downtown from slum to jewelbox [sic].”<sup>85</sup> In a sense he was right. HemisFair forever altered the “scripted space” of San Antonio. It helped

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<sup>84</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968). Also known as the Kerner Commission Report.

<sup>85</sup> As quoted in CBS's *Hunger in America*, 1968.

pave the way for San Antonio's modern tourist mecca. Tourists can leisurely ride a riverboat down the San Antonio River, stop at a Mexican restaurant and eat "authentic" Mexican cuisine, or perhaps pay a mariachi band to play "La Bamba" for the hundredth time. In this Faustian pact, the worker loses as she or he is required to perform in such a manner that meets the tourists' expectations or risk losing out on the monetary compensation that allows them to put food on the table, and perhaps even their own identity in the process.

Thus, two competing visions of progress vied for control of the city. The city's business elite wanted to wrest control of the mechanisms of power from a political machine that had dominated the city for decades and that they could not control. By 1951, McAllister and his allies had largely succeeded. They installed a seemingly reformed minded individual in the mayor's office who helped usher in the changes necessary to rewrite the city's charter to a more business friendly alternative. They cut the compensation for city council members to drive out the professional politicians. From their perspective, the city manager would be an efficient business leader that would run the city like a corporation with the council acting as a board of directors. Municipal reformers slipped a bit when Mayor White went rogue and tried to usurp power for himself by aligning with powerful factions who disliked the annexation plan that would cut through their own property. Discouraged, reformers understood that they needed more control over the process, so they formed the Good Government League and by 1955 the GGL had won its first electoral victory in a landslide election by putting forth a slate of preapproved candidates for council. With the addition of Walter McAllister as mayor in 1961, this ensured the GGL almost unchecked power in determining economic growth for the city. They used urban renewal as a tool launch HemisFair '68, an expensive coming out party for the city of San Antonio that would remake the downtown urban landscape.

But this vision left out the people. McAllister and the GGL had ensured that they funneled development projects to the northside. For instance, a medical school—that would become a medical center, one of the city’s largest employers USAA, an insurance company for the military, and the city’s first public university—all moved to the north and northwest side of town. While the ethnic Mexican West Side languished, the prosperous northside flourished with economic activity. The commercial development generated sprawl but also encouraged residential development. Property taxes rose and Anglos, and some middle class *mexicanos*, prospered as a result. Westside residents still lived in squalor while the nation celebrated San Antonio’s bicentennial. The only time the downtown business elite gave thought to West Side residents was when they commodified their cultural heritage to further San Antonio’s brand as a bicultural mecca—a large city with “old world” charm.

The consequences of affirmative policy choices made by the business elite during San Antonio’s period of rapid economic development in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century would have lasting implications. Spatial segregation increased while services and access to well-paying jobs remained elusive for many West Side residents. As the fair marched on, a group of Westside parents decided to take action. Inspired in part by their kids’ activism, they found an attorney willing to take up what they saw as self-evident: the overt discrimination of *mexicano* families by the state’s public education system. In the lawsuit that followed, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District*, the nature of economic inequality in San Antonio was on the proverbial chopping block. If the parents won their case, it had the potential to upend decades of compounding inequality whereby one’s geographic location determined destiny.

## Chapter 5

### “The Little Man Has Lost Again”: *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* and the Quest for Equal Education”

“Just because we’re poor doesn’t mean we should get a poor education,” read one of the many signs held aloft by a student amid a throng of protestors marching through San Antonio’s West Side on March 29, 1973.<sup>1</sup> Three hundred marched for equal education and to protest the Supreme Court ruling in *San Antonio Independent District v. Rodriguez* (1973).<sup>2</sup> They marched from Edgewood High School to Gus Garcia Elementary School where an estimated thousand gathered for the rally. The site chosen was no accident. In 1968, the walkouts at Edgewood High School precipitated the legal action that led to the march. Gus Garcia Elementary School was named after famed civil rights attorney Gus Garcia who championed the rights of *mexicanos* in Texas. Both schools were deep within the heart of San Antonio’s racially and economically segregated *barrio*. “We are not looking for glory. We are seeking justice,” cried James Gonzales of the Edgewood Concerned Parents Association (ECPA)—the group of parents who brought forth the litigation. Also speaking at the rally was Arthur Gochman, the civil rights attorney who represented the Edgewood parents. “The children of Edgewood support the *Rodriguez* case one hundred percent,” Gochman declared. “People in the North East and Alamo Heights School Districts support the Supreme Court,” Gochman added, referencing the wealthier and whiter part

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<sup>1</sup> “S.A. School Protest Moving to Austin,” *San Antonio Light*, March 29, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the chapter I will refer to both the federal District Court case, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District* (1969), decided by a three-judge panel in San Antonio and the appeal heard at the U.S. Supreme Court called *San Antonio Independent School District v Rodriguez* (1973). Hereinafter *Rodriguez* (1969) and *Rodriguez* (1973).

of San Antonio. State Senator Joe Bernal said, “history will show we were correct on the *Rodriguez* case.” It might not be in their lifetime he argued, but “if we make the effort, we will overcome because we have right on our side.”<sup>3</sup>

One month later, the People’s Lobby for Equal Education (PLEE) led by everyday people—students, parents, and teachers—some four thousand strong, piled into their vehicles and made their way north to Austin. *La Raza Unida* members and its supporters joined with the PLEE organizers at the capitol.<sup>4</sup> Longtime San Antonio resident and activist Alberta Snid felt the turnout PLEE received was impressive.<sup>5</sup> Organizers gathered on the capitol steps and delivered passionate speeches demanding equal education for *mexicanos*. Governor Dolph Briscoe even delivered a speech, although he had to wait for the boos and jeers to die down before the crowd would allow him to speak. Briscoe offered some platitudes to the gathered crowd. He promised to increase funding to help equalize education. Snid called it a “lollipop” designed to placate the crowd. Briscoe was not interested in addressing the structural problems inherent in the Texas public school finance system.<sup>6</sup> Demetrio Rodriguez, lead plaintiff in *Rodriguez*, agreed and called the stopgap measure a “bribe.”<sup>7</sup> As the afternoon wore on, *La Raza Unida* supporters and Brown Berets became more boisterous. At one point they, briefly, raised the Mexican flag on the capitol after Briscoe had spoken. While there was some concern among PLEE members that

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<sup>3</sup> “S.A. School Protest Moving to Austin,” *San Antonio Light*, March 29, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Partido Nacional de La Raza, colloquially known as *La Raza Unida*, was a *Chicano* third party organization in Texas, and the Southwest. Ramsay Muñiz ran under the *La Raza* banner and lost to Dolph Briscoe in 1972 and 1974. For more on *La Raza Unida*, see for example, Armando Navarro, *La Raza Unida Party: A Chicano Challenge to the U.S. Two Party Dictatorship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> “People’s Lobby March Left Emotions Mixed,” *San Antonio Express*, May 3, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

their cries for equal education would be overshadowed by the Chicano activists' antics, everything turned out fine. State Representative Matt Garcia of San Antonio said, "There was some pushing and shoving, some names were called, but it all wound up on a peaceful note."<sup>8</sup> Alberta Snid felt that the march a success, but lamented that "If it had not been a working day I'm sure more parents would have joined us."<sup>9</sup>

At issue that day was the *Rodriguez* defeat. In a 5-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a lower court ruling that would have drastically altered how states financed public school across the nation. Edgewood parents, through Gochman, argued that funding public schools with property taxes exacerbated inequality between rich and poor districts. They felt such inequality amounted to a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. Writing for the majority, Justice Powell held that "to the extent that the Texas system of school financing results in unequal expenditures between children who happen to reside in different districts, we cannot say that such disparities are the product of a system that is so irrational as to be invidiously discriminatory." Moreover, Powell continued, Texas's school finance system "certainly is not the product of purposeful discrimination against any group or class."<sup>10</sup> Revealingly, Justice Powell used the phrase "who happen to reside" in two different districts as if the residential segregation created and maintained by the state was an accident. It was not. The case has been called one of the worst decisions the Supreme Court has made since 1960.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Stopgap School Aid Plan Announced," *San Antonio Express*, May 3, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Justice Lewis Powell, "Majority Opinion," *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 US 1 (1973).

<sup>11</sup> "The Worst Supreme Court Decisions Since 1960," *Time*, October 6, 2015, <http://time.com/4056051/worst-supreme-court-decisions/>.

Justice Thurgood Marshall, writing the dissent, argued that Powell's opinion was an overt endorsement of economic discrimination. "The Court today decides, in effect, that a State may constitutionally vary the quality of education which it offers its children in accordance with the amount of taxable wealth located in the school districts in which they reside." Moreover, "The majority's holding can only be seen as a retreat from our historic commitment to equality of educational opportunity and as unsupportable acquiescence in a system which deprives children in their earliest years of the chance to reach their full potential as citizens."<sup>12</sup> Marshall did not equivocate in his dissent. He believed that the Court's decision enabled wealth discrimination. Children's zip codes would continue to determine their access to quality education with the *Rodriguez* ruling.

In *Rodriguez* (1973), a group of parents armed only with their righteous belief that their children deserved a quality education, and their lawyer Arthur Gochman who worked pro bono, brought forth one of the most provocative and potentially important Court decisions since *Brown v Board of Education* (1954). Unlike *Brown*, which focused its attention on the harmful psychological effects of segregation, *Rodriguez* attacked the material foundations from which inequality was made: the unequal distribution of resources between rich and poor. If upheld, *Rodriguez* would make *wealth* a suspect class, just like race, national origin, and religion. That increased scrutiny placed a higher burden on the state to prove that any discrimination that existed was a "compelling government interest."<sup>13</sup> Potentially, this higher bar meant that states would have to meet the strict scrutiny test in order to discriminate against its residents. If it did

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<sup>12</sup> Justice Thurgood Marshall, "Dissenting Opinion," *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 US 1 (1973).

<sup>13</sup> Legal Information Institute, "Strict Scrutiny," [https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/strict\\_scrutiny](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/strict_scrutiny).

not meet that threshold, the legislation would be deemed unconstitutional. For a fleeting moment, the *Rodriguez* case brought wealth discrimination on the table. The implications went far beyond the educational arena.

*Rodriguez* also helps demystify the artificial, and ultimately, unhelpful, legal distinctions between *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination. The state understood *mexicanos* as white by law, thus no formal legal system of segregation existed for *mexicanos*. Nevertheless, segregation existed, and nowhere was this more apparent than in residential segregation and its attendant consequences. Moreover, as recent scholars have suggested, school choice and school boundaries inform and create inequality as much as residential segregation. In other words, schools play an active role in creating the segregated metropolis.<sup>14</sup> An analysis of *Rodriguez* and its relationship to the spatial landscape of San Antonio in the late 1960s and 1970s build on this work. Finally, *Rodriguez* illustrates the ideological power of “local control” and how such arguments are deployed to buttress inequality rather than ameliorate it.

### **5.1 The 1968 Edgewood High School Walkouts**

The West Side had long been the hub of progressive activism in San Antonio. The potent mixture of racial, economic, and spatial segregation and a community that fought for access to greater metropolitan democracy often fueled moments of disruption. Alberta Snid’s presence at the PLEE rally in Austin testifies to the long activist spirit in the community, as she was also

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<sup>14</sup> Ansley Erickson, *Making the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9.

there during the Pecan Shellers strike as young girl. The Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s helped fuel the activist spirit, especially within San Antonio.<sup>15</sup>

In May 1968, hundreds of mostly ethnic Mexican students walked out of their classrooms to protest the inadequate resources and unequal education endemic at Edgewood High School, one of the poorest schools in the poorest district in San Antonio. Other “blowouts” occurred across the country in Los Angeles earlier that spring.<sup>16</sup> In both Los Angeles and San Antonio, Chicano/a students demanded simple amenities. For example, at Edgewood, the students lacked basic things such as hot water for showers, the equipment necessary for body work in shop class, they had out of date textbooks, run down facilities with broken windows, no air conditioning, and lacked experienced teachers. But, these disparities were not easily recognizable to many students because as, Edgewood junior, Diana Hererra said, “we didn’t know any better.”<sup>17</sup> By that she meant that many of the students had nothing to compare their experiences to since, by and large, the *barrio* was their world. She recalled that some of the seniors who wanted to go to college found that the classes offered at Edgewood were “not the caliber of classes needed to enter university.”<sup>18</sup> Edgewood teachers were often ill-prepared, ill-trained, and ill-suited to teach high school students.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multicultural Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); David Montejano, *Quixote’s Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) and *Sancho’s Journal: Exploring the Political Edge with the Brown Berets* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Mario T. García, *Blowout! Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Diana Herrera, by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/>. Hereinafter cited CRBB interview.

<sup>18</sup> University Interscholastic League is an organization which helps to foster competition and educational enrichment

In December 1968, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) held hearings in San Antonio to “collect information regarding the civil rights problems of Mexican Americans in the five Southwestern states.”<sup>19</sup> In testimony to the USCCR about the quality of education he received, Edgewood student Martin Cantu said, one of the physics teachers “told the students that he was not qualified to teach the course” that he was assigned and asked the students to “bear with him.”<sup>20</sup> The lack of proper teacher training was a widespread criticism among Edgewood students. Edgewood Senior, Irene Ramirez, testified to the USCCR that we marched and “asked for better qualified teachers” because “Edgewood had the highest number of nondegree teachers. . . . I was told by one of the school board members that we had more nondegree teachers than ever before. So I really don’t think we have better courses. I feel that the course and the teacher go hand-in-hand.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, many Edgewood students complained that their guidance counselors did not foster their college aspirations. When asked if she dreamed of going to college, Edgewood Senior, Irene Ramirez said “Of course, but from the very beginning we are taught—I mean, this is an impossible dream.” She explained, “everybody assumes that you are going to get married probably in your sophomore year, and they rarely emphasize

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for public school students across Texas.

<sup>19</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, Day 1, December 9, 1968, statement of Chairman of John A. Hannah, Chairman of the Commission, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), 2.

Note: this is a published transcription of the five-day hearings including all exhibits. Hereinafter cited USCCR Hearings.

<sup>20</sup> Testimony of Martin Cantu, Dec. 10, 1968, USCCR Hearings, 186.

<sup>21</sup> Testimony of Irene Ramirez, Dec. 10, 1968, USCCR Hearings, 203

education to the girls in my high school.”<sup>22</sup> Instead of encouraging Ramirez to aspire to reach her full potential, some of the faculty at Edgewood seemed to stifle that growth.

Students often found themselves “tracked” onto a vocational path irrespective of their own desires. Or, for the boys, Vietnam. Richard Herrera, a junior at the time of the walkouts, explained. He felt that Edgewood was “a vocational school” but the students “didn’t even know it . . . because we just thought it was part of the program.” Richard Herrera mused that as an Edgewood graduate, he had two options, either work at Kelly Air Force Base as a civil servant or go to Vietnam, college was not an option. Indeed, in 1988, the Edgewood class of 1967 dedicated a memorial to all the Edgewood graduates who were killed or were listed as missing in action in Vietnam. There are 53 names inscribed on the memorial, ten of whom came from the 1967 graduating class.<sup>23</sup>

The students also protested the inadequate resources spent on students at Edgewood. Diana Herrera recalled a moment when the disparity in educational facilities was made apparent to her. A friend of hers was selected to represent Edgewood’s typing team for the University Interscholastic League (UIL) competition. When the students got to the venue, they sat down in front of state of the art electronic typewriters. The only problem: the Edgewood team had only practiced on manual typewriters. They had no idea how to turn on the machines, much less use them effectively in competition.<sup>24</sup> Stories like the one Diana Herrera related abound at

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<sup>22</sup> Testimony of Irene Ramirez, USCCR, 203.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Richard Herrera, June 2016, CRBB interview; Lindsay Kastner, “Touched by War, Edgewood Honors Fallen Former Students,” May 28, 2013, <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/education/article/Touched-by-war-Edgewood-honors-fallen-former-4551267.php> (accessed February 23, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Diana Herrera, June 2016, CRBB interview.

Edgewood. In large part, the lack of funding had to do with the structure of the Texas public school finance system. Suffice it to say, for now, that poorer districts had a much more difficult time generating the type of revenue necessary to provide a quality educational experience for their students. Edgewood Superintendent José Cárdenas put it this way. “We have a system that assists the privileged.” The Texas public school finance system enabled the more affluent districts to provide a “privileged education so that the distribution of resources is such that people of high wealth . . . get very good educational services for their children.” Cárdenas concluded that the “school financing system is a repeating circle of inequality” which reinforced class difference.<sup>25</sup> In real terms, the fiscal constraints on a poor district meant they often had to make difficult choices because they could not afford to, for example, hire enough guidance counselors for their students or pay teachers above the minimum salary. This is critical. Part of the reason Edgewood continually had inexperienced or unqualified teachers was because the district could not afford to pay teachers above the base wage while wealthier districts could. And schools competed with one another for quality teachers.

On May 16, 1968, Edgewood students, with the support of their parents, a few teachers, and the community, gathered on the front lawn of Edgewood High School to march to the district offices. As Richard Hererra put it, “It was a community thing.”<sup>26</sup> They carried handwritten premade signs that read “We Want Equal Education,” “Better Library, Better Teachers, Better Schools,” and “Every Student in America Deserves a Good Education.”<sup>27</sup> The students believed

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with José Cárdenas, interviewed by José Angel Gutiérrez, CMAS no. 69, December 10, 1997. Tejano Voices, University of Texas at Arlington, <https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/interview.php?cmasno=069>.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Richard Herrera, June 2016, CRBB interview.

<sup>27</sup> *San Antonio Express*, May 17, 1968. After the passage of the Gilmer-Aikin laws in 1949 (which I will go into depth below), most of Texas’ common school districts consolidated into “independent school districts” separate and distinct from the counties or cities in which they resided. Hereafter, for the sake of brevity, I will use the term “ISD”

if they applied pressure on Edgewood administrators, they could force change within their classrooms. At the very least they could bring their concerns to Bennie Steinhauser, the district superintendent reasonable for their well-being and education. Rather than meet with the students directly, Steinhauser directed his assistant superintendent to placate the gathered students and send them home. Later, Steinhauser addressed members of the media suggesting that the students were actually “outside agitators” stirring up trouble within the student body. He claimed that most of the students “don’t even know what they are supposedly unhappy about.”<sup>28</sup> Steinhauser used the tried and tested language of Southern resistance to depoliticize and dismiss a student-led action with legitimate concerns.

Deterred, but not defeated, Edgewood student protestors met with community leaders in the weeks following the walkouts to help articulate a set of actionable demands to present to the school board. On Monday, May 20, 1968, the students held a mass meeting on the campus of Holy Cross High School. In a show of solidarity, members from old guard civil rights groups such as the American GI Forum, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) met with the students and parents. Spurred by the students’ actions, a small group of parents formed the Edgewood Concerned Parents Association (ECPA) which would be an important force for educational change in the community. Additionally, Father Henry Casso, a well-known and respected advocate for social justice in San Antonio, represented the Catholic Church. Father

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to refer to an independent school district.

<sup>28</sup> *San Antonio Express*, May 21, 1968.

Casso remarked that some of his parishioners had encouraged him to take a stand because one could only do “so much preaching.”<sup>29</sup>

Mario Compean, of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) and later a founding member of La Raza Unida (and gubernatorial candidate himself), along with Willie Velásquez, who would later found the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SWVREP), saw educational equality as an important issue that would help them organize the West Side community.<sup>30</sup> Compean and other Chicano activists felt that LULAC’s efficacy in bringing litigation on behalf of Mexican Americans often left out a key constituency: the community. Thus, Steinhauer was right in one small regard. MAYO helped the students organize, but the walkout itself was student directed. For MAYO, the walkouts were an important means to get the community engaged in public education, but it also helped MAYO build a base of support within the community which enabled them to later launch La Raza Unida.<sup>31</sup>

The importance of MAYO to the growth of the Chicano Movement in San Antonio, Texas, and across the Southwest cannot be overstated. MAYO’s founders, Mario Compean, José Angel Guitérrez, Juan Patlán, Willie Velásquez and Ignacio Perez (Los Cinco), conceived of the organization as the mechanism through which they would development a liberation strategy for

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<sup>29</sup> *San Antonio Express*, May 21, 1968.

<sup>30</sup> For more on MAYO, see Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); On Willie Velásquez, see Juan Sepúlveda, *The Life and Times of Willie Velásquez: Su Voto Es Su Voz* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2003); for a general history of San Antonio’s civil rights movement, see David Montejano’s fantastic study, *Quixote’s Soliders: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) and its compendium, Montejano, *Sancho’s Journal: Exploring the Political Edge with the Brown Berets* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mario Compean, interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

Chicanos to increase their political power and agency in San Antonio and across the nation. Los Cinco studied broadly, they read the works of Franz Fanon and Saul Alinsky. They met with Chicano leaders like César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, Corky González, Stokely Carmichael, and H. Rap Brown to learn how to organize and to create a praxis based upon a radical framework.<sup>32</sup> MAYO articulated a confrontational style politics that often chafed the old guard from the “Mexican American Generation,” the LULAC-types.<sup>33</sup> As one scholar notes, MAYO “realized that the main problem with traditional Chicano organizations was that their programs were not oriented toward helping or changing the *barrios*.”<sup>34</sup> This was especially true of Congressman Henry B. González who infamously had MAYO leadership surveilled by local law enforcement and used his position of power to pressure the Ford Foundation to cut its ties with the radical organization.<sup>35</sup> But MAYO’s strategy of direct action worked, especially as it related to the Edgewood walkouts.

In the end, the students compiled a modest set of demands for the school board. Those included changes to the curriculum, improvement to the school’s facilities and maintenance, and the hiring of more qualified teachers.<sup>36</sup> The students also asked for a few changes that would make their schooling more participatory and democratic—a grievance panel to lodge complaints to the administration and more freedom to voice their concerns to the student council. Finally,

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<sup>32</sup> David Montejano, *Quixote’s Soliders: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>34</sup> Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organizations: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 86.

<sup>35</sup> Montejano, *Quixote’s Soldiers*, 92, 96.

<sup>36</sup> *San Antonio Express*, May 21, 1968.

the students wanted to ensure that none of the teachers who participated in the walkouts—there were two who taught classes outside during the demonstrations—would face retaliatory action from the administration.<sup>37</sup> With the exception of the last demand, the school board, faced with greater publicity and scrutiny, promised to enact many of the students’ demands concerning the democratization of the education and creating a more rigorous environment for learning.<sup>38</sup>

While the walkouts only lasted a few days, in many ways, it was an important moment for civil rights activism in San Antonio. For the students like Richard Herrera, who was a junior at the time he participated in the walkout, they had an impact. Despite threats from administration officials, Herrera decided to walkout for all the seniors who felt pressured not to because the administration said they would hold diplomas or revoke scholarships for those seniors who participated. Herrera felt he had “nothing to lose” so he “took up the banner” for those that could not participate. “We [had] a right to protest. And we [were] right to do what [were] doing,” said Herrera. Despite the threats and the uncertainty about future, Herrera was adamant that the walkouts mattered. “We made a difference,” Richard Herrera concluded. For activists like MAYO, the walkouts offered a way for Compean to transform months of planning and theorizing into praxis. The Edgewood walkouts would be the precipitating action that would launch similar walkouts across south Texas as well as garner the support within the community to launch La Raza a few years later. But, most important for our purposes, it was the event that precipitated the *Rodriguez* court action that alleged the state’s public school finance system discriminated against students property poor districts.

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<sup>37</sup> *San Antonio Express*, May 28, 1968; The anecdote about the teachers holding class during the walkout came from the Compean CRBB Interview.

<sup>38</sup> *San Antonio Express*, May 28, 1968.

## 5.2 Inequality from the State: the Texas Minimum Foundation Program

To understand the *Rodriguez* argument that Texas discriminated against poor and *mexicano* we first must delve into the depths of the Texas public finance system. At the heart of public school financing in Texas was property taxes. In order to alleviate any disparities between districts, the state created the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) in 1949. Rather than mitigating economic inequality between school districts across the state, the MFP exacerbated the differences between rich and poor school districts.

Since 1876, the Texas Constitution mandated that the state create and maintain “an efficient system of free public schools in Texas.”<sup>39</sup> Early Texas legislators believed that an educated public was vital to protecting the rights and liberties of individual citizens. One needed to be able to understand democracy and its institutions to preserve it. While legislators have debated, amended, and contested other aspects of the constitution, the state’s fundamental commitment to free public education remained constant. In the United States, generally, providing a minimum public education system has been left to the states as the U.S. Constitution does not hold education as a fundamental right. As a result, the quality of public education varies from state to state as it is tied to the vicissitudes of the state budgetary process, as well as politics.

While the constitution provides that the state should create an adequate public-school system, the reality on the ground often did not match the rhetoric codified in law. Disparities in

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<sup>39</sup> *Constitution of the State of Texas, Adopted by the Constitutional Convention, Begun and Held at the City of Austin, on the Six Day of September, 1875.* (Galveston: Printed at the “News” Steam Book and Job Establishment, 1875), Texas Const. art. VII, § 1. Tarleton Law Library, University of Texas at Austin, <http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/constitutions/> (accessed February 12, 2019).

public education facilities, teacher pay, and the quality of education varied widely from place to place in Texas, especially for rural school districts. One historian argues that World War II laid bare the stark deficiencies of the Texas public education system to adequately prepare its graduates for the rigors of adulthood, especially as it related to service to the country and democracy.<sup>40</sup> Because of this realization, and in no small part due to the political battle that ensued when the Legislature voted to increase public school teacher pay but could not come to an agreement on how to finance the increase, legislators created a commission designed to study and modernize the public education system in Texas. The committee became known as the Gilmer-Aikin Commission (GAC) and its efforts would introduce the most radical overhaul of the state's public education system ever.

In 1949, the GAC published its major conclusions on how to modernize the Texas public education system. The committee was under no illusions about the task set before them. "Education is big business in Texas now. It must become even bigger. And it must become bigger fast," argued the GAC in their final report to the Texas Legislature.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, there was a sense of urgency within the GAC's report because "a million babies have been born in Texas" within the past six years.<sup>42</sup> They did not want a lost generation of children growing up with inadequate educational opportunities. Thus, adhering to the spirit of the GAC's recommendations, the Texas Legislature signed into law Senate Bill (SB) 115, 116, and 117

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<sup>40</sup> Gene B. Preuss, *To Get a Better School System: One Hundred Years of Education Reform in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> Gilmer-Aikin Committee, "Final Report of Gilmer-Aikin Committee," January 25, 1949, *Senate Journal Supplement*, Fifty-First Legislature, Austin, Texas. [https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/interim/50/50\\_Gilmer-Aiken.pdf](https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/interim/50/50_Gilmer-Aiken.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

(collectively known as the Gilmer-Aikin bills) in 1949.<sup>43</sup> SB 115 provided for the creation of a centralized authority to oversee the Texas public education system known as the Central Education Agency (now known as the Texas Education Agency) comprised of a twenty-one member elected board that had the authority to appoint its commissioner.<sup>44</sup> SB 116 provided an economic formula to equalize state funding for school districts throughout the state and the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP). SB 116 also consolidated Texas's 4,500 school districts into 2,900. And, finally, SB 116 provided public school teachers with an increase in pay.<sup>45</sup> SB 117 created the mechanism to facilitate the financing of SB 116.<sup>46</sup> While imperfect, the GAC bills helped to modernize the public education system in Texas. But the reforms were not without their detractors: some decried the erosion of rural schools while others saw a creeping state moving into areas that were best left to local communities.<sup>47</sup> But, generally, these criticisms were muted as the legislation passed easily through both chambers.

One of the lasting legacies of the GAC bills had to do with SB 116, the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP). The MFP was essentially a giant pot of money that would fund public education in Texas. The state estimated how much the MFP would cost during a given period and would require local communities to pay into the fund based on the total amount. Essentially, the formula worked out to the state providing 80% of the funds while local

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<sup>43</sup> Mark G. Yudof and David C. Morgan, "Rodriguez v San Antonio Independent School District: Gathering the Ayes of Texas—The Politics of School Finance Reform," *Law and Contemporary Problems* (Winter 1974), 386.

<sup>44</sup> Rae Files Still, *The Gilmer-Aikin Bills: A Study in the Legislative Process* (Austin: The Steck Company, 1950), 2-4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-9; 156.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Preuss, *To Get a Better School System*, 87, 89.

communities contributed their “fair share” of 20%.<sup>48</sup> The program helped to stave off insolvency of many school districts but engendered new forms of inequality at the same time.<sup>49</sup>

Part of the problem with the MFP had to do with how it calculated each community’s “fair share” of the program, or how much each community would contribute to the fund. The formula the state used to calculate the total share of the program was based on data from county tax assessors. Aside from often proving an unreliable indicator on how much a district could afford to pay, Texas did not have a standard metric for tax assessors to use across Texas’s counties. In his testimony before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) in 1968, Harold Ivy, director of the Governor’s Committee on Public School Education, explained: “Since property taxes are the only source of local revenue then it has to be assumed that what you just do is equalize in terms of property taxes that can be paid. The formulas which Texas used are indirect. We use a series of factors which attempt to determine the income level of each county.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the state assumes that all the real property in a given location is valuable based on local valuations, but that does not take into consideration the locale’s ability to generate enough tax revenue to pay its “fair share” into the MFP. Moreover, because the total cost of the program was calculated in aggregate numbers at the state and county level, these calculations “separated the cost of a district’s own program from the amount of local taxes required to support that program.”<sup>51</sup> In practice, this meant widespread discrepancies between

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<sup>48</sup> Mark G. Yudof and David C. Morgan, “*Rodriguez v San Antonio Independent School District*,” 386.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 387.

<sup>50</sup> Glenn H. Ivy, “Testimony of Mr. Glenn H. Ivy, Director, Governor’s Committee on Public School Education, Austin, Texas,” December 9, 1968, *Hearing Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), 238. Hereinafter USCCR.

<sup>51</sup> Texas Research League, “Texas Public School Finance: A Majority of Exceptions,” November 1972, p. 6, <https://eric.ed.gov/> (accessed February 01, 2019).

districts. For school districts in wealthier areas, they could satisfy the state's requirements for the MFP program easily while districts in property poor areas might have a harder time meeting the threshold. On paper, the state's economic index treated all districts equally; however, when applied to districts on the ground, the metric left much to be desired, especially for poorer districts. Dr. José Cárdenas, former Edgewood ISD superintendent, felt that the "local enrichment" provision within Gilmer-Aikin created the most disparity in educational funding between districts because districts with a high degree of property wealth, a small increase in the tax rate "would produce an extensive amount of funds."<sup>52</sup> Or, as Cárdenas succinctly put it: "We have . . . a system that . . . assists the privileged people to have, for their children, a privileged education so that the distribution of resources is such that people of high wealth, of the rich and the famous get very good educational services for their children."<sup>53</sup> Thus, MFP funding tended to favor wealthier school districts because they could meet the requirements easier, receive the state aid, and still have money left over to reinvest in their students' education. For families in poorer districts, with lower property values, this effectively meant they were taxed at a higher rate to meet the minimum standard required by the state.

The state also provided credits for different types of property located within a given school district in order to lower the tax burden on the district with respect to the MFP requirement. For example, if a district had a national forest, military base, or Indian Reservation within its boundaries, the state could provide credits to reduce their taxable burden which

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<sup>52</sup> José Cárdenas, *Texas School Finance Reform: An IDRA Perspective*, (San Antonio: Intercultural Development Research Association, 1997), 15.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with José Cárdenas, by José Angel Gutiérrez, December 10, 1997, *Tejano Voices*, The University of Texas at Arlington, CMAS 69, [https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS\\_069.xml](https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_069.xml).

seemed to operate similarly to how the state allows individuals to reduce their taxable liability by claiming certain exemptions in the tax code. Some experts believed that this allowed school districts across the state to circumvent the intent of the system to equalize funding between districts to receive more state aid. But, the limitations in the Gilmer-Aikin laws went further because of the inherent limitations in how county assessors evaluated real property in their jurisdictions. A provision in the MFC called the “maximum tax rate limitation” pegged tax valuations to *county* levels rather than within the district’s borders. This is important because valuations at the county level were often lower than within the district and could differ from one county to another. In Texas, there was no standard metric for evaluating real property, and so it varied from location to location. The non-partisan Texas Research League found that when “resourceful” districts claimed this exemption, and pegged their property valuations to the county assessors numbers, which were often much less, “158 independent school districts were able to reduce their local fund assignments by more than \$21 million in 1971-72 – and to increase their state aid by a like amount.”<sup>54</sup> In short, because of the legislative limitations baked into the MFP, and an over emphasis in relying on property tax valuations, public education in Texas was anything but equal.

Thus, the Gilmer-Aikin laws in Texas reveal some of the constraints the state imposed on public education financing. In a way the state incentivized discriminatory practices because of the way the financing laws were set up, especially with respect to the exemptions contained within the law. But on a more fundamental level, the state fostered a sort of competition among school districts when Gilmer-Aikin pushed for the consolidation of school districts and created

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<sup>54</sup> Texas Research League, “Texas Public School Finance: A Majority of Exceptions,” November 1972, pp. 7-8, <https://eric.ed.gov/> (accessed February 01, 2019).

independent ones. Each district had its own imperatives to achieve and that did not correspond with the territorial borders of a given municipal government. By the 1970s, Bexar county had at twelve major independent school districts that crisscrossed its borders (including those from incorporated cities within its borders as well) most of which became independent after Gilmer-Aikin.

### **5.3 Spatial Segregation and Annexation Policy Creating Unequal School Boundaries**

The spatial makeup of San Antonio, buttressed by residential segregation and loose annexation laws, helped to exacerbate economic inequality in the public-school system in and around San Antonio. As mentioned in an early chapter, during the postwar period, San Antonio's population exploded, as did its growth in terms of raw acreage. Between 1950 and 1970, San Antonio annexed 110 square miles.<sup>55</sup> That type of rapid growth was made possible by virtue of the Texas' home rule statute which gave cities enormous discretion on how to manage growth and San Antonio's charter revision in 1951 which, among other things, created a council-manager form of government. Under San Antonio's new charter, annexation only required majority vote in the City Council. Since the Good Government League maintained hegemony in the city council for nearly twenty years, that also meant they had control over issues of annexation and growth.<sup>56</sup> In short, the politics of annexation were intricately tied to the politics of economic growth for the city, and the GGL understood this as did others throughout the community.

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<sup>55</sup> Arnold Fleischmann, "Sunbelt Boosterism: The Politics of Postwar Growth and Annexation in San Antonio," in *The Rise of the Sunbelt Cities*, eds. David C. Perry and Alfred J. Watkins (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977), p. 167.

<sup>56</sup> Fleischmann, p. 156.

Not everyone wanted to be part of the city and pushed for annexation on their own. In addition to its numerous independent school districts, San Antonio also has numerous incorporated cities within its territorial borders. Among the most notable were Alamo Heights (1922), Olmos Park (1939), Terrell Hills (1939), Balcones Heights (1948), and Leon Valley (1952). Many of these communities chose to incorporate instead of being swallowed by the larger city of San Antonio for obvious reasons: the ability to manage their affairs locally and pay lower taxes than they might have with the city. When Alamo Heights incorporated in 1922, one of the selling points was that it had already established a high school which makes “Alamo Heights far in the lead of any similar community in education.”<sup>57</sup>

From the outset, then, overwhelmingly white spaces such as Alamo Heights saw the separation from the city as an important facet of their character and identity, and boosters promoted its exclusivity and amenities as important facets of their attractiveness to potential residents. Indeed, many of San Antonio’s earliest white politicians called Olmos Park home including Mayor Walter McAllister. Developers created the bedroom suburb as a bastion of calm away from the tumult and turmoil of city life. For example, one newspaper article described Olmos Park as a “‘live and let live’ city . . . unhampered by governmental woes.” Why? “Because it pays no city taxes.”<sup>58</sup> The city prided itself on the low taxes its residents paid relative to San Antonio residents. This applied to the real estate industry as well: low taxation was a perennial selling point for real estate agents, along with school districts. Real estate agents not

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<sup>57</sup> San Antonio *Light*, June 22, 1922.

<sup>58</sup> San Antonio *Light*, February 15, 1948.

only sold a potential buyer a home, but the dream that went along with it. “Everything is wonderful . . . including taxes,” in the Olmos Park Estates one advertisement read.<sup>59</sup>

For other real estate agents, the selling point became the Alamo Heights school district which encompassed the bedroom suburbs of Alamo Heights, Terrell Heights, and Olmos Park. Indeed, “Alamo Heights schools” became ubiquitous in classified advertisements for homes selling in those neighborhoods during this period. For example, one read: “Heart of Terrell Hills Alamo Heights Schools” in big block letters before even listing a small description of the house for sale.<sup>60</sup> In this example, the house itself became secondary to location. The dream that the developer sold in this instance was its connection to the neighborhood; the exclusivity desired by those who could afford to live away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Just like Anglos imagined the West Side as a space of brownness and criminality, the incorporated suburbs of Alamo Heights, Olmos Park, and Terrell Hills became synonymous with an affluent whiteness steeped in class privilege and suburban home ownership. Thus, when a listing spotlighted the suburban space, prospective buyers understood the language developers used and the class fantasy being sold. Over the course of the twentieth century as San Antonio expanded, these pockets of middle and upper middle-class respectability and lifestyle became a prominent class identifier. When residents of the *barrio* identified where they came from, it was not uncommon for residents to say *the West Side*. West Side became a class identifier as much as a geographical location on the map. Similarly, “niner”, a reference to the zip code 78209, became synonymous with those from Alamo Heights, often used as a term of derision by some. In general, because of San Antonio’s racial and economic segregation, these shortcut class markers became integral in

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<sup>59</sup> San Antonio *Light*, February 15, 1948

<sup>60</sup> San Antonio *Express and News*, August 6, 1961.

determining one’s social location. Thus, when boosters such as Walter McAllister pushed their pro-growth business agenda through the city council, the incorporated suburbs of Alamo Heights, Olmos Park, and Terrell Hills guarded their exclusivity. Other incorporated areas such as Leon Valley and Balcony Heights, located further West, remained autonomous but they never retained any semblance of class identity as the city slowly, and purposefully, encroached on them and, eventually, surrounded them preventing further expansion.

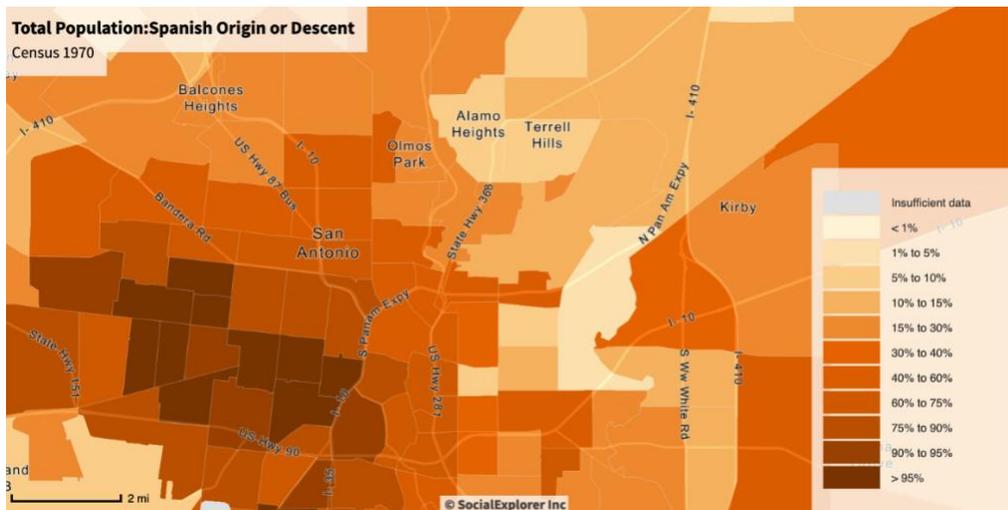


Figure 5.1 Total Population: Spanish Origin or Descent, 1970. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Total Population: Spanish Origin or Descent, 1970,” Map Courtesy of Social Explorer.

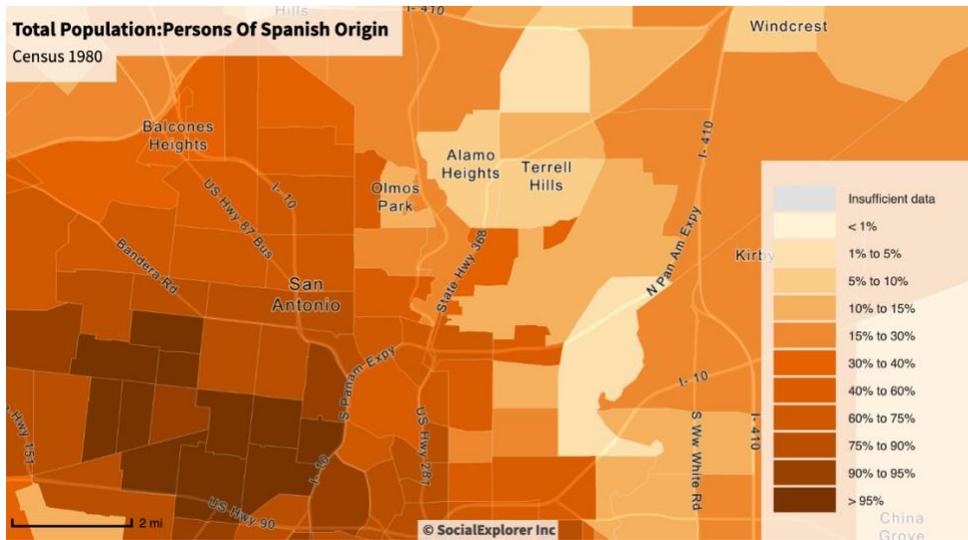


Figure 5.2 Total Population: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1980. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer.<sup>62</sup>

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate two decades of population growth in San Antonio by census tract.<sup>63</sup> The darker the tract, the more concentrated the population of ethnic Mexicans. Conversely, the lightest colors represent the tracts with the fewest ethnic Mexicans present. A simple glance at the maps paints a picture of the growth of the West Side *barrio* westward over time while the Alamo Heights, Terrell Hills, and, to a lesser extent, Olmos Park remain relatively homogenous. Some tracts on the West Side were upwards of 95% or more exclusively ethnic Mexican. Indeed, as illustrated Figure 5-3 (below) by 2010 the whiteness in Alamo Heights, Terrell Hills, and Olmos Park remain relatively steady throughout the years reminding us that residential segregation is a generational problem for San Antonio.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Total Population: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1980,” Map Courtesy of Social Explorer.

<sup>63</sup> The maps are courtesy of Social Explorer using data from the decennial census. The streets are contemporary overlays from 2010 and were not necessarily present during the time, especially prior to 1970 when San Antonio’s highway system was being constructed. They are meant to orient the reader spatially.

It is important to remember that Juan Crow operated differently than Jim Crow, it was never a totalizing force as was Jim Crow in some areas of the country. “Juan Crow” was permeable, ethnic Mexicans moved in spaces where African Americans could not, especially if one had wealth.<sup>64</sup> This likely accounts for the some of the ethnic Mexican population in Olmos Park. Olmos Park, Alamo Heights, and Terrell Hills was where “old money” tended to live, so it is possible that middle class and upper middle-class ethnic Mexicans move in and out of these neighborhoods over the years. In San Antonio, in the twentieth century, especially in the latter half, class mobility was real, but unevenly distributed, especially for the poor and working class in the *barrio*. The San Antonio case study is perhaps one of the best examples of why artificial distinctions of *de jure* versus *de facto* segregation have little analytical value. While San Antonio prided itself on “voluntary” desegregation in the 1950s, similar to Atlanta in this regard, the lived experiences of many working class and poor *mexicanos* changed little.<sup>65</sup> If you lived your entire life within four square miles, hemmed in because of residential segregation, and unable to advance because of employment discrimination, it mattered very little whether the discrimination you faced was legal or not; one’s lived experiences often trumped such artificial distinctions. Moreover, as other scholars have suggested, by creating these artificial distinctions mask the very real, very pervasive, and very insidious nature of residential and economic segregation that informed the daily lives of most *mexicanos* living in the city.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Here I borrow the term “Juan Crow” from Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas*.

<sup>65</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 206-207.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Matthew Lassiter, “De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth,” in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 32-51.

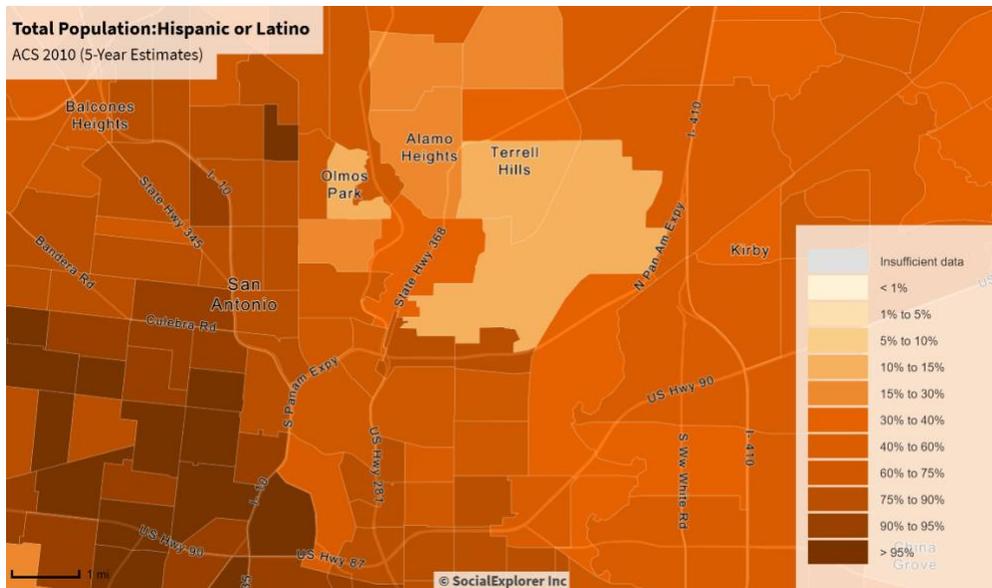


Figure 5.3 Total Population: Hispanic or Latino, 2010. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer.<sup>67</sup>

In San Antonio, like other cities across the nation, multiple forces operated at the same time which worked in concert to create San Antonio’s segregated metropolis. In early 20<sup>th</sup> century San Antonio, Anglos constructed the *barrio* through discursive means by creating an imprint in their minds about where the “good” side of town was versus the “bad,” where crime and criminality existed as opposed to the tranquility of the suburbs. The federal government also helped create the *barrio* through redlining and, especially, incentivizing the movement of Anglos out to suburbia by manipulating the marketplace through the FHA and VA home loan programs. Real estate agents and developers did their part by using racially restrictive housing covenants to ensure spaces such as Olmos Park stayed relatively homogenous and they also acted as the gatekeepers to those communities. Finally, the construction of public housing located mostly in communities of color, including two on the West Side also contributed to the creation and

<sup>67</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Total Population: Hispanic or Latino, 2010,” Map Courtesy of Social Explorer.

expansion of the segregated metropolis because they were segregated by race and those most in need of affordable housing tended to be people of color.

The confluence of all these factors acted in concert to help construct San Antonio's segregated spatial landscape. But there is one other factor that has yet to be mentioned: the school system itself. Historian Ansley Erickson reminds us that school districts have never been neutral actors in the construction of what she calls the "unequal metropolis." Erickson argues, "Many scholars have examined schooling in American cities, but too few have traced how schools figure in the making of the city. Schools were not simply pawns in a changing and challenging urban and metropolitan context: they helped shape that context. . . . School policy became an actor in the city, embedded in and contributing to basic structures of metropolitan inequality."<sup>68</sup> Just like Erickson's study of Nashville, an examination of San Antonio's school policy matters a great deal and has helped perpetuate inequality in San Antonio in its own right.

When Alamo Heights incorporated in 1922, it also created its own independent school district apart from the county system.<sup>69</sup> This was a risky endeavor given that part of the reason for the Gilmer-Aikin reforms that led to widespread consolidation and the proliferation of independent school districts was that rural school districts in Texas often had poor property tax revenue. The new residents in Alamo Heights made the gamble that their community would survive without too much reliance on the city of San Antonio for its needs. At the time of incorporation, the Alamo Heights school district included the nearby suburb of Olmos Park

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<sup>68</sup> Ansley Erickson, *Building the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Christine Drennon, "Social Relations Spatially Fixed: Construction and Maintenance of School Districts in San Antonio," *Geographical Review* vol. 96, no. 4 (Oct. 2006), p. 580.

which would not officially incorporate until the late 1930s.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, the founders of Alamo Heights understood that their community was going to be built on exclusivity and that their school system would reflect the kind of community they wished to be. The original school building had been created in 1912, but they had been working on renovations to the building which would make it “the finest rural school in the Southwest.”<sup>71</sup> The inclusion of Olmos Park, and eventually nearby Terrell Hills ensured that would be the case. By the 1960s, the Alamo Heights ISD would be one of the best school districts in the city. Its rich property tax base meant that, although small in terms of acreage, the revenues drawn from its resident’s property taxes amounted to a great deal because of the values of the homes in those exclusive suburbs. By the 1960s, the Alamo Heights ISD would include nearby Terrell Hills. Detached from the county, the Alamo Heights school board could set its own tax rate within its borders. But because the property values in Alamo Heights were so high, taxes could remain low while still garnering an elite educational experience for the children who attended Alamo Heights schools. For example, in 1968, the assessed valuation per pupil in Alamo Heights amounted to \$23,343 whereas Edgewood only had an assessed valuation per pupil of \$2,208.<sup>72</sup> The state created the MFP to mitigate the discrepancy between property rich and property poor districts, but it rarely did, especially in a place such as San Antonio. Thus, the ability to create school district boundaries matters a great deal.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 580.

<sup>71</sup> *San Antonio Light*, June 25, 1922.

<sup>72</sup> U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Study of Equality of Educational Opportunity for Mexican Americans in Nine School Districts in San Antonio Area*, 1968. Education Resources Information Center, <https://eric.ed.gov/> (accessed February 20, 2019), p. 16.

Another way that school district decisions helped shape San Antonio's unequal metropolitan landscape was by preventing the expansion of school district boundaries. In 1908 when the community established the Edgewood school district, it was on the periphery of the West Side. Joe Bernal recalled that the Edgewood district was properly named because it "was at the edge of the woods" and the fields beyond that "was just fields cultivated mostly by Czechs." That lands was used "mostly for crops."<sup>73</sup> The district's first school was Edgewood elementary. Even by 1930, the district had not grown much in terms of size. It had only 678 students, 14 teachers, and around 14 classrooms.<sup>74</sup> The population growth that San Antonio experienced during the Depression years and especially during the postwar period stretched the small district to its limits. By 1960, the district had a total student enrollment of 12,880 and faculty of 454. In 1967, total enrollment in the Edgewood district leveled off at 22,649. Enormous growth for such a small district. Dealing with the growth became a difficult issue.<sup>75</sup>

Edgewood administrators understood they lived in a precarious financial situation. The district had virtually no property tax revenue to speak of since most of its inhabitants lived in poverty. Unlike San Antonio ISD whose borders contained the central business district, Edgewood's district contained many substandard homes. This meant that the property taxes assessed on these homes would be low. Edgewood had no significant industrial parks to inflate property tax values. Indeed, two of its main residents—Kelly Air Force Base which comprised

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<sup>73</sup> Joe Bernal Interview, interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>74</sup> Edgewood Independent School District, *Edgewood in the Space Age*, San Antonio, Texas, 1967, p. 3; Box 603, E. 48W114A; Civil Case Files, 68-175; Western District of Texas, San Antonio; U.S. District Courts; Record Group 21, National Archives and Records Administration at Ft Worth, Fort Worth, Texas. There is no publisher information, but it looks like this book was created within the Edgewood District for promotional purposes.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

approximately one-fourth of the district's territory and the Alazan-Apache public housing complex—paid no property taxes because they were federal entities which were exempt. To make matters worse, the high school students from nearby Lackland Air Force Base who should have gone to Edgewood, which would mean increased federal funds for the district in lieu of property taxes, were bussed through the Edgewood district to Jefferson High School in the San Antonio ISD because Edgewood's "educational reputation is inferior to that of Jefferson."<sup>76</sup>

Edgewood administrators sought to merge with San Antonio ISD because they understood that their ability to grow had a ceiling given the poor property tax base within its boundaries. Since 1948, Edgewood periodically petitioned the San Antonio ISD for annexation. Each time San Antonio ISD rebuff their advances. During one such moment, an official for the San Antonio ISD succinctly stated Edgewood's problem. "The district is most difficult to assimilate," James Shea said. In large part because Edgewood covered a "large area with somewhat scattered population, with low assessed values."<sup>77</sup> In 1955, when Edgewood broached the topic of annexation, San Antonio ISD Superintendent Thomas B. Portwood stated, "Further discussion of the possible annexation of Edgewood will be in order when the building needs of both districts have been cared for."<sup>78</sup> Clearly the San Antonio ISD was just not that into Edgewood. In 1948, Edgewood was too sparsely populated to make an attractive addition to the San Antonio ISD, while in 1955 it was too crowded and underdeveloped. San Antonio ISD officials knew well that annexing Edgewood would be like an albatross. Unlike Alamo Heights

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<sup>76</sup> U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Study of Equality of Educational Opportunity for Mexican Americans in Nine School Districts in San Antonio Area*, 1968. Education Resources Information Center, <https://eric.ed.gov/> (accessed February 21, 2019), p. 27.

<sup>77</sup> *San Antonio Express*, January 18, 1948.

<sup>78</sup> *San Antonio Light*, March 30, 1955.

and its attendant school district which incorporated itself to separate itself from San Antonio and its large ethnic Mexican population, San Antonio ISD was the oldest and one of the largest school districts in San Antonio.

But this is precisely the point. Individual school districts, along with their school boards that were elected, had the ability to shape the metropolitan landscape. Consolidation with a larger school district made sense for a struggling district like Edgewood. It simply did not have the property tax base to fund its district adequately while a district like Alamo Heights or even San Antonio ISD had a much broader tax base which allowed more flexibility in their funding, especially with the local enrichment provision of the MFP. As Edgewood Superintendent Bennie Steinhauser said in 1965, “The San Antonio district has all of the downtown business property. We have very little business and our residential values are low.”<sup>79</sup> One of the problems with the Gilmer-Aikin laws is that by creating the incentives for districts to consolidate and tying state funding to property tax assessments, the state fostered competition between districts rather than engendering a sense of community between school districts. The local school boards and school administrators were tied to local schools within their districts. They had a fiduciary obligation to do what was in the best interest for their districts instead of thinking about what would be best for the community writ large, and all of the students within that community. But this type of generosity of spirit was antithetical to the narrative being created as the United States suburbanized.

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<sup>79</sup> San Antonio *Express*, August 4, 1965.

#### 5.4 “It’s not the \$20,000 House I Object to—It’s the \$3,000 Family”: The Downfall of Turnkey III Housing

The majority opinion in *Rodriguez* expressed concern that any sort of tinkering with the Texas public school finance system by the Court would overrule local control by the tax-paying citizens in the community. Likewise, the attorneys for the state argued that an equalizing program would subvert taxpayers’ ability to spend their tax dollars on their children’s education at a neighborhood school. Justice Powell was reticent to touch issues of local control when it meant depriving white suburban parents the opportunity to maximize opportunity for their children. This type of “me-first” politics was nothing new. School boards and district administrators across the state excelled at maximizing state support for *their* students even at the expense of other students. Indeed, as historian Robert O. Self argues, “Suburban Americans came to understand their interests, political obligations, and especially the *limits of their social responsibility* within those spatially bounded communities.”<sup>80</sup> This particular type of political identity developed in the United States in the postwar period was deeply rooted in homeownership, property rights, the belief in meritocracy, and the free market. It shaped how many white suburbanites understood the world in which they lived and the story they told themselves about how they got there. By extension, this meant that school administrators and boards faced pressure to provide the best possible education for the students within their districts. And from the vantage of homeowners and administrators, this was not surprising. The state created a public education system for all Texas residents free of charge paid, in part, by their collective tax dollars. It stood to reason, then, if their district could afford to go above the minimum set forth by the state, that was their right as tax-paying property owners. They worked

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<sup>80</sup> Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 333. Emphasis mine.

hard to purchase their homes, they paid their fair share in property taxes, and their children ought to reap the benefits. The poverty, disinvestment, and residential segregation that often-plagued urban schools, the argument went, had nothing to do with them and their children. Those parents just needed to work a little harder.

One of the problems with that framework, however, was that it did not take in the structural nature of the inequality being created and recreated within the *barrio* over decades. One other example of this can be seen in the city's embrace of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Turnkey III housing policy. From the New Deal public housing projects, to traditional urban renewal, to Model Cities in 1969, San Antonio had been on the forefront of trying to inject federal dollars into the West Side in order to mitigate the deleterious effects of poverty and disinvestment in the *barrio*. The problem that the Good Government League (GGL) and the City Council could never come to terms with was that the pro-growth policies that pushed development to the north and northwest sides of towns was precisely the reason why the West Side *barrio* remained inured in poverty. But, part of the problem was the NIMBYism evinced by some middle-class homeowners who believed that poverty was caused by a personal failing rather than broader structural forces beyond the control of many. The Turnkey III episode was an excellent example of how this sort of NIMBYism politics worked on the ground in San Antonio.

On August 17, 1967, President Johnson directed his HUD Secretary, Robert Weaver, to implement an experimental public-private partnership whereby a private entity would construct and manage public housing.<sup>81</sup> The Johnson administration called this the Turnkey Program.

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<sup>81</sup> Joseph Burstein, "New Techniques in Public Housing," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 32, no. 3 (Summer 1967), 528.

Historian Nancy Kwak has found that the ideas for Turnkey-style programs evolved out of the self-help programs of an earlier era as organizations sought to fill a void in the market, especially in underserved communities.<sup>82</sup> Operating in three phases, the ultimate goal would to encourage homeownership among lower income residents. In Turnkey I, a private builder constructed housing units and then sold the units to government, usually the local housing authority. In Turnkey II, the government turned the management of the Turnkey I properties over to a private entity which could be for profit or nonprofit, or even a coalition of local homeowners. Finally, in Turnkey III, the logical conclusion of the program would be that individual residents paid into their homes, building up equity, until such time that the house becomes theirs outright.<sup>83</sup>

As with other federal programs, the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA) found Turnkey III promising. On May 29, 1969, San Antonio's City Council brought SAHA's director, Richard "Dick" Jones, to answer the council's questions surrounding new public housing construction and the possibility of converting some current projects, especially in the Model Cities neighbored, which was essentially the West Side, to the Turnkey III program. While questions of legal authority abounded, Jones professed a strong desire to see that happen. The City Council had previously authorized the construction/renovation of 2,000 public housing units in San Antonio with the majority designated for the elderly and the rest for large families. About 1,500 homes had been built or renovated, and the council had to decide what to do with the remaining 500 units. District Two Councilman, Herbert Calderon asked Mr. Jones, are "any of this scheduled for the Model Cities area, any of this Turnkey Project?" Jones responded that

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<sup>82</sup> Nancy H. Kwak, *A World of Homeowners: American Power and the Politics of Housing Aid* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 196.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph Burstein, "New Techniques in Public Housing," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 32, no. 3 (1967), 528.

SAHA had earmarked approximately 75 units for the Model Cities area. For the remainder, Jones wanted permission to spread the remaining four hundred units to “the four quadrants” of San Antonio—meaning the South, North, East, and West sides of the city.<sup>84</sup> Generally, most council members seemed to agree with Turnkey III on principal so long as it served the needs of the Model Cities neighborhood. Council members seemed especially concerned with developing Turnkey III housing in the Model Cities neighborhood since that was where much of the urban renewal focus had been since San Antonio had been selected as a site for Model Cities in 1969 in no small part due to Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez’s efforts. Nevertheless, the Council adjourned without voting on the matter for a week at Councilman Herbert Calderon’s direction, so they could have more time to study the matter.

The honeymoon period for this new low-income housing development technique would prove short-lived in San Antonio. In May 1970, Dick Jones gave a speech to an Urban Development and Housing seminar in Denver where he offered his experiences in trying to usher Turnkey III through the political process in San Antonio. Again, the initial response from the Council seemed generally receptive. Where the problem occurred was when SAHA announced the sites that the Turnkey III homes would be built. Remember, SAHA had committed to build 100 units in each quadrant of the city. Perhaps predictably, then, SAHA’s Turnkey III experiment ran into a roadblock. The “love fest continued until the next Board of Commissioners of the Housing Authority announced the exact locations of the four winning proposals,” Jones recalled. “It was as if gasoline had been poured in a bonfire. . . two of the four neighborhood exploded immediately. . . . Within thirty days the future neighbors, school boards, and indignant

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<sup>84</sup> Dick Jones to Herbert Calderon, “Regular Meeting of the City Council of the City of San Antonio Held in the Council Chamber,” May 22, 1969. San Antonio City Council Minutes, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

citizens from every walk of life descended upon the City Council and Housing Authority with a fury unmatched by anything that I have ever witnessed.”<sup>85</sup> As SAHA Executive Director, Dick Jones had an intimate look at how his work affected the lives of real people, everyday San Antonio residents. In the speech, Jones talked about how difficult his job had been because of entrenched special interests. But, when Turnkey III came around, because of its private component, HUD was able to co-opt an important piece of the opposition from Jones’s perspective. “The formidable opponents of public housing from the real estate and home building industries during the years 1949 to 1965 were invited to become partners with the local housing authorities in seeking solutions to local housing problems,” Jones argued. He went on to say that the “marriage of convenience” worked remarkably well in his experience in San Antonio.<sup>86</sup>

That the Turnkey III “scatter shot” housing program would meet with indignation and outright hostility was perhaps not too surprising given the climate at the time. Walter McAllister took pride in the fact that businesses in San Antonio had long voluntarily agreed to desegregate and “the city council amended the local civil rights act ordinance to eliminate discrimination in apartment housing in April of 1966 and in July of 1968 passed an open housing ordinance.”<sup>87</sup> But the image McAllister sought to foster belied the reality on the ground where San Antonio was rife with residential segregation as mentioned above. Thus, when SAHA announced a proposal that promised to nominally break through those barriers, many in the San Antonio community balked. On September 15, 1969, a group of two hundred and fifty residents met at

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<sup>85</sup> Richard “Dick” Jones, “Public Housing: Turnkey and Leasing,” May 25 and 26, 1970, Public Housing: Turnkey and Leasing, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Walter McAllister, “Statement of Honorable Walter McAllister, Mayor of San Antonio, Texas,” to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in San Antonio, Texas, December 11, 1968.

Forest Hills Elementary School to voice their displeasure. Ms. Biaz furor perfectly encapsulated that of her compatriots in the Forest Hills homeowners' group. "I not only don't want Turnkey III in Forest Hills, I don't want Turnkey III in San Antonio," Biaz said. The location at which the local Forest Hills homeowners chose to meet was not random. SAHA proposed that one of their 100-unit test sites be built adjacent to Forest Hills Elementary, located in the north-west part of the city. But, symbolically the group leveraged the elementary school as a site of contestation, and by extension their children.

They combined their identity as homeowners to resist the encroachment of "outsiders" into their community. Mrs. O.R. Jones put the opposition to Turnkey III more succinctly by bringing up the Alazan-Apache Courts. "Remember how that was the answer to the slum problem?," Jones asked. "Well what have you got there now." The implication was clear. Jones did not want to bring SAHA's experiment to her part of town. The "slums" that SAHA were supposedly to have cleared with public housing had not worked to Jones' satisfaction. And from her perspective, now SAHA wanted to drop that sort of poverty into her neighborhood, next to her children, and the children of everyone else in Forest Hills. Jones drew on a logic and fear to help make her argument against Turnkey III more explicit and it was the type of language that would have resonated with others in the group. Mary Housel agreed she was "fed up with this free housing" and felt it was "time to put a stop to it." The chairman of the local Republican Party, L. E. Shepard, agreed. He made the conservative argument that Turnkey "stands to benefit no one except the very few people who are involved in construction." Moreover, Shepard argued that Turnkey was discriminatory because the money spent on the program would be better spent on those in "real need." He concluded, "I personally would be in favor of a petition to do away

with SAHA.”<sup>88</sup> None of these homeowners wanted the “problems” on the West Side to expand beyond its borders. Rather than the structural barriers to homeownership and high paying, high quality jobs endemic for ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio, the homeowners viewed the real enemy as SAHA and the “free housing” that their tax dollars were wasted on. The residents who would benefit from Turnkey, a program designed to turn low income residents into homeowners, was beyond the pale for some of San Antonio’s residents precisely because it brought it into their backyard and into the schools where their children went to. This was the state overreach and social experimentation gone awry. SAHA wanted to force desegregation on homeowners by creating pockets of low income, and by extension in San Antonio, brown residents in middle class white communities.

The Forest Hills homeowners meeting was the first in a series of meetings they held in opposition to Turnkey III. They, and other citizens, articulated their opposition to Turnkey III during a City Council meeting on September 25, 1969. Gloria Stagsdell argued that the program would be too costly for taxpaying citizens of San Antonio. She said that the infrastructure surrounding the social program would be cost prohibitive because SAHA would have to “teach people how to take care of homes in which there would be a tremendous amount of bookkeeping.” Implicit in Stagsdell’s racialized comments was that the Turnkey residents would not be of the right caliber to handle the responsibilities of homeownership and that SAHA and taxpayers would have to fund some sort of education program to teach the residents how to keep and maintain their homes when in actuality the homeownership rate among ethnic Mexicans was relatively high. For example, one study found that ethnic Mexicans in the Southwest had a

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<sup>88</sup> “Forest Hills Homeowners Protest Turnkey,” *The San Antonio Light*, September 16, 1969.

homeownership rate of 53% in 1960.<sup>89</sup> But because of residential segregation, many ethnic Mexicans simply could not move outside of the West Side *barrio*. Or, perhaps more precisely, over the course of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the *barrio* expands westward to accommodate the growing population. Another resident, Rosemary Key argued that the children of the Turnkey residents would overburden the county school system in which they were placed which, incidentally, was in the rapidly urbanizing northwest part of town. For Key, apparently, the quality of education for her and her neighbors' children would decline if the Council approved a Turnkey III site in the northwest.<sup>90</sup>

The opposition to Turnkey III, however, did not all come from one particular interest group. William Lesea argued that he felt that the city treated him as a second-class citizen even though he was a "good citizen." He argued that the program's threshold was too high. It did not provide enough support for those truly in need. He also stated the obvious that "people don't want low-income families coming into their neighborhoods." Lesea, who lived in the deep West Side *barrio*, understood what some city planners and those in SAHA did not. For SAHA Executive Director Dick Jones, Turnkey III was an important tool in the toolkit of those who worked in the housing sector. It co-opted the real estate and building trades by making them part of the solution while attempting to solve a legitimate problem in cities across the nation: how to house the poor, working poor, and those who cannot afford to buy a new home in the suburbs. As a purely policy matter, for Jones, Turnkey III was a no-brainer. But Lesea, who lived on the

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<sup>89</sup> Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, Ralph Guzman, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York: Free Press, 1970), 254.

<sup>90</sup> Rosemary Key to the San Antonio City Council, "Regular Meeting of the City Council of the City of San Antonio Held in the Council Chamber," City Hall, September 25, 1969. City Council Minutes, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

West Side, and likely experienced discriminatory treatment understood at a visceral level what Jones did not.

In the end, the city council and SAHA abandoned Turnkey III due to pressure from the (mostly) Anglo North Side community. Turnkey III went from a novel policy idea to increase homeownership for low income families to political toxicity *thirty days* after the publication of the proposed sites. Most Anglos were fine with SAHA experimenting with housing initiatives on the West Side but once those ideas crossed the proverbial tracks, SAHA met stiff resistance. The *San Antonio Express/News* ran two tongue and cheek article about Dick Jones in their “Dubious Distinction” section. The first read: “Deguello Award: To opponents of Turnkey III who sounded the bugle call then charged again and again at Dick Jones and the Housing Authority until City Council surrendered.” Immediately underneath, a follow up that read: “Little Bighorn Award: To Dick Jones, who commented after Turnkey III, “Now I know how Gen. Custer felt when he said, ‘How do I get these arrows out of my back.’”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, the city council did killed the program because of staunch opposition. Of the Turnkey III affair, Dick Jones lamented, “A local cartoon summarized it best with a caption: ‘It’s not the \$20,000 house I object to—it’s the \$3,000 family!’” He went on to say, “This was the second time that we had been decked by trying to break out of the older neighborhoods into better ones. The mixing of families of different incomes appears to be much more difficult than the mixing of races or ethnic groups.”<sup>92</sup>

“It’s not the \$20,000 house I object to—it’s the \$3,000 family!” cartoon perfectly encapsulated the localism that animated white homeowner politics in San Antonio and across the

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<sup>91</sup> *San Antonio Express/News*, December 21, 1969.

<sup>92</sup> Richard “Dick” Jones, “Public Housing: Turnkey and Leasing,” May 25 and 26, 1970, Public Housing: Turnkey and Leasing, San Antonio Municipal Archives.

nation during this period. David Freund suggests that in metro Detroit “whites’ investment in homeownership bred a new kind of emotional and economic investment in their own racial privilege,” whereas Robert Self characterizes it as “white homeowner politics” in his study of Oakland, but no matter how one chooses to articulate the localism engendered by state-sponsored segregation, the belief in meritocracy, and its investment in the protection of whiteness, the insidious nature of white homeowner politics remained remarkably stable.<sup>93</sup> And this ideology used to justify exclusion in the housing market permeated all levels of society including the Supreme Court. When Justice Powell offered his opinion *Rodriguez*, his “experience on the Richmond School Board led him to develop great affection for the idea of local control over the schools.”<sup>94</sup> Local control is steeped in political ideology based upon the protection of white spaces and white bodies. It is simply another way to describe discriminatory treatment without admitting that one’s actions were discriminatory or animated by race.

### **5.5 *Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District*<sup>95</sup>**

The *Rodriguez* court case began with the student walkouts in May 1968. Following the student-led direct action, a group of Edgewood parents got together to form the Edgewood Concerned Parents Association (ECPA). Alberta Snid, a member of the ECPA, helped her group get organized. While Demetrio Rodriguez often gets much of the credit because the case bore his name, Alberta Snid was “the organizer” and the “active lady” that worked behind the scenes. As

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<sup>93</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 10; Self, *American Babylon*, 16.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Sracic, *San Antonio v. Rodriguez and the Pursuit of Equal Education: The Debate over Discrimination and School Funding* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 66.

<sup>95</sup> For legal analysis of *Rodriguez*, see Paul Sracic, *San Antonio v. Rodriguez and the Pursuit of Equal Education: The Debate over Discrimination and School Funding*. This is perhaps the one of the most comprehensive texts on *Rodriguez*, outside of legal studies and law journals, which provide an intricate legal analysis of the court case.

was often the case with activism in San Antonio, *mexicanas* shouldered much of the burden. For example, when Emma Tenayuca organized the pecan shellers in the 1930s, regular women from the community helped run the soup kitchens and ensured that people on the lines were fed. It is also important to remember that as a young girl, Snid's mother brought her to the picket lines where Snid learned about worker solidarity. Snid applied that experiential knowledge to her work within the ECPA.<sup>96</sup>

Never a large organization, the ECPA operated off a small budget. It received its funding through the Mexican American Unity Council (MAUC), which granted them a \$5,000 startup fund to help the organization get off its feet.<sup>97</sup> MAUC was a community development program that operated in San Antonio. It was the San Antonio local of the Southwest Council of La Raza (SWCLR). SWCLR received a \$630,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to fund local organizations that helped empower ethnic Mexican participatory democracy in the *barrios*.<sup>98</sup> SWCLR was an advocacy organization that operated as a pass-through vehicle which funded local endeavors such as MAUC.<sup>99</sup> In turn, MAUC funded community level initiatives. Throughout the Chicano Movement, MAUC received tens of thousands of dollars from the SWCLR. With a solid source of funding, MAUC helped launch several initiatives within the *barrio*, from housing rehabilitation programs to substance abuse treatment facilities. They also

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<sup>96</sup> For more on women organizing and activism in two different spaces, see for example, Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Rhonda Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>97</sup> Juan Sepúlveda, *The Life and Times of Willie Velásquez: Su Voto es Su Voz* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2003), 74.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>99</sup> The Southwest Council of La Raza became the National Council of La Raza in 1973 and UnidosUS in 2017.

helped the first generation of college graduates, social workers, educators, and business development people.<sup>100</sup> MAUC was a wide-ranging, non-profit development organization designed to directly aid residents in the *barrio*.

MAUC's initial leadership consisted of Willie Velásquez and Juan Patlán, two foundational members of MAYO. To their credit, MAYO front men Velásquez and Gutiérrez understood that when they "started raising hell" in San Antonio and other areas, they would become persona non grata within polite society. In addition to funding local projects, Chicano activists looked to MAUC for jobs. Mario Compean estimated that at one point the MAUC employed two hundred people in various capacities.<sup>101</sup> MAYO leaders understood that organizing the community would be essential to their long-term political aspirations: La Raza Unida. The third-party challenge to the two-party hegemony within start party politics in Texas. But MAYO leaders were also pragmatic enough to understand that they also needed to establish an economic base in their communities because residents in the *barrio* desperately needed home grown organizations that would cater to their specific community needs.<sup>102</sup>

Armed with some funding, the ECPA retained the services of Arthur Gochman, a local civil rights attorney. He worked pro bono for the ECPA. Willie Velásquez knew Gochman from their work in Crystal City organizing farm workers. Gochman served as a voluntary city attorney in Crystal City. When the parents presented their concerns to Gochman, he soon realized the problem went much deeper than corruption from Bennie Steinhauser. In June 1968, Gochman

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<sup>100</sup> Mario Compean interview, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

filed suit in the federal district court for the Western District of Texas, in San Antonio. Gochman decided to make Rodriguez the lead plaintiff because of his ethnic sounding last name.<sup>103</sup>

Gochman quickly realized the case would be big so reached out for aid. He contacted the nascent Mexican American Legal and Education Defense (MALDEF) that had just opened their doors in San Antonio the month prior with a \$2,250,000 grant from the Ford Foundation.<sup>104</sup> In its early days, MALDEF focused on “litigation directed toward bettering the conditions of the poor.”<sup>105</sup> Immediately MALDEF was flooded with potential cases so they had to limit types of cases they would accept. While *Rodriguez* fit their broad purview of education discrimination, Paul Sracic argues that MALDEF and Gochman disagreed on legal strategies on how to pursue the Edgewood parent’s complaint. Gochman felt the case had a strong Equal Protection argument while MALDEF wanted the case to remain at the state level.<sup>106</sup> They agreed to part ways and Gochman handled the district court case on his own. When the case went to the Supreme Court on appeal, Gochman had mapped out a legal strategy that did not include MALDEF. George Luna, who was an attorney for the Edgewood district and helped to found MALDEF, felt Gochman made an error in that regard. Luna believed that Gochman wanted to do things his way

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<sup>103</sup> Demetrio Rodriguez, “Education is the Best Thing,” in Peter Irons, *Courage of their Convictions: Sixteen Americans who Fought their Way to the Supreme Court* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 298. This book has chapters where the author allows the subjects to speak in their own words while he provides the broader historical context where necessary.

<sup>104</sup> Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, *Texas Mexican Americans and Postwar Civil Rights* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 92, 93. For a detailed account of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund’s origins, see chapter 3 of *Texas Mexican Americans and Postwar Civil Rights*. The organization began in San Antonio in 1968 but moved to California.

<sup>105</sup> Alan Exelrod, Mike Mendelson, Gerald Lopez, and Alvaro Garza to the Committee on Policy of the Mexican American Legal [Defense and Education Fund], “The Legal Work of the Fund and its Priorities,” 1968. Albert A. Peña, Jr. Papers, MS 37, General Correspondence Folder, Box 20, The University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>106</sup> Paul Sracic, *San Antonio v. Rodriguez and the Pursuit of Equal Education: The Debate over Discrimination and School Funding* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2006), 25.

and “was not willing to share the leadership in producing the cases in the Supreme Court.” The subsequent Supreme Court reversal in 1973 really “hurt us” Luna recalled. He meant that the loss in *Rodriguez* circumscribed future legal redress with respect to public school financing at the federal level.<sup>107</sup>

At the district court level, Gochman’s argument was fairly straightforward. He believed that the Texas public school finance system denied poor and minority children “equal protection of the law in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>108</sup> He argued that that the “the quality of education received” was “a function of the wealth of their parents and neighbors as measured by the tax rate and property values of the school district in which they reside.”<sup>109</sup> In Texas, then, geography was destiny to some degree because where one lived determined the quality of education they received because of the inherent flaws in a system that relied on property tax dollars for its main funding source. All Gochman had to do now was prove his case. The state’s argument was simple as well. The state’s lawyers argued that Texas provided a minimum education to its residents as required by the Texas Constitution and that the “plaintiffs were seeking ‘socialized education.’”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with George Luna, interviewed by José Angel Gutiérrez, CMAS no. 4, July 1, 1996. Tejano Voices, University of Texas at Arlington, [https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS\\_004.xml](https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_004.xml).

<sup>108</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); Plaintiffs’ Proposed Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

<sup>109</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); Second Amended Complaint, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

<sup>110</sup> Mark Yudof and Daniel Morgan, “*Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District*: Gathering the Ayes of Texas: The Politics of School Finance Reform,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 38, no. 3 (Winter-Spring, 1974), 393.

Gochman enlisted the help of several key witnesses who would testify on behalf of poor Texas school children regarding the unequal treatment they received at the hands of the state. Gochman's star witness was Joel Berke, the Director of the Educational Finance and Governance Program of the Policy Institute, Syracuse University Research Corporation, and an adjunct political science professor. Berke's study concluded the following:

the system of school finance in Texas makes the quality of education a direct function of the wealth of local school districts, providing consistently higher quality schooling in districts with higher property values per pupil and consistently lower quality education in school system with less local resources available for taxation. . . . [And] that the poorer districts tax themselves at consistently higher equalized tax rates yet realize far lower tax yields than is true in richer districts.<sup>111</sup>

In other words, districts with higher property values within their boundaries were able to spend more money on education per pupil than districts with lower property values inside their district. See Table 5.1. Due to Alamo Heights's higher property values, it could spend \$558 per pupil on education whereas a district such as Edgewood could only spend \$248 per pupil. That meant that Alamo Heights could spend over \$300 more per student on things such as teacher salaries, guidance counselors, or the district could reinvest that money the students' education. Edgewood Superintendent José Cárdenas testified that "Edgewood does receive qualified applications for its positions, but those same applicants apply in the other Bexar County Districts as well, and Edgewood cannot compete with the salaries such districts offer." Further, Edgewood students had 3.9 library books per child whereas the North East ISD had 9.42 library books per child. Moreover, Edgewood lacked counselors. Edgewood had one counselor for every 5,672 students

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<sup>111</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); Plaintiffs' Proposed Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, Exhibit A, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

whereas that ratio for Alamo Heights was one for every 1,319 students.<sup>112</sup> The uneven distribution of resources caused by the inadequate Texas public school financing system was striking.

Perhaps most astonishing was Berke's finding that poor districts taxed themselves more but received less. Table 5.2 illustrates that Edgewood would have to tax its constituents \$5.76 per \$100 to equal what Alamo Heights could do at just \$.68. But, given state law, even if that were possible, Texas law capped the amount school districts could levee in taxes. Finally, Berke also found a relationship between wealth in the school district and the minority population. He concluded that "the more Negroes and Mexican-Americans in the school population of a district, the lower its revenues for education."<sup>113</sup> Unfortunately, while Berke laid out the relationship between race and district wealth, he did not take the logical next step and make a causal argument as to why that might occur. In other words, Berke presented the data on race, he suggested that there was a relationship between race and property wealth in a school district but did add the effects of residential segregation to the equation.

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<sup>112</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); José Cárdenas Deposition, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

<sup>113</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); Plaintiffs' Proposed Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, Exhibit A, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

School Districts Ranked From High to Low by Market Value Per Pupil (MVPP)	Median Family Income From the 1960 Census	Per Cent Minority Pupils	State-Local Revenue Per Pupil
Alamo Heights ISD (49,478 MVPP)	\$8,184	14%	\$558
North East ISD (28,202 MVPP)	\$5,900	7%	\$415
San Antonio ISD (21,944 MVPP)	\$4,691	72%	\$353
North Side ISD (20,794 MVPP)	\$4,600	62%	\$323
Harlandale ISD (11,345 MVPP)	\$4,436	62%	\$323
Edgewood ISD (5,960 MVPP)	\$3,405	75%	\$248

Table 5.1 Relationship Between District Wealth, Income, Race, and State-Local Revenue.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

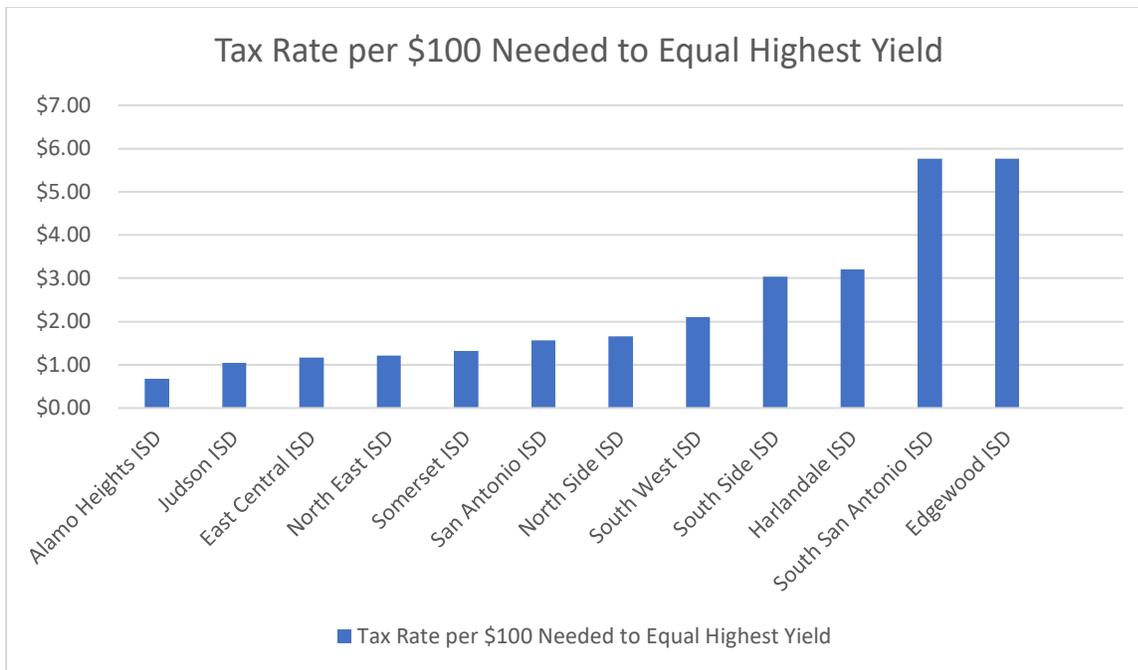


Table 5.2 Bexar County Districts Ranked by Equalized Property Value and Tax Rate Required to Generate Highest Yield in all Districts<sup>115</sup>

Richard Avena, the Director of the Southwestern Field Office for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, also testified on behalf of the Plaintiffs. Avena’s testimony was critical because he articulated the missing link in Berke’s theory about the correlation of race and low property valuations. Avena argued that the state had segregated *mexicanos* through racially restricted covenants. Here is a portion of Avena’s testimony:

Q: Let’s take San Antonio. Here is a district that starts out thirty years ago in a particular section of town, with, say, a fairly low percentage of Mexican Americans in it. But, over the next thirty years . . . the Mexican American population . . . begins to rise. Then you wouldn’t say that the State or the school district has, in effect, brought about this segregation of Mexican Americans in this district, would you?

A: I wouldn’t say, necessarily it was the school district. I would say in some cases, there were acts by the state or local entities, restrictive deeds . . . which caused a population pattern to exist. And this population pattern in turn then developed into a segregated—

Q: In other words, this might have happened in instances, but you are not saying it has happened in every—

A: No, Sir.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

[...]

Q: Are you aware [that Edgewood] was initially created as a school district years ago and that it was almost 100 percent Anglo?

A: I had heard this. I have no way of saying if that is true or not.

Q: Do you know of any state or local action that has caused this percentage to raise? Anything that they have done specifically in creating the school district or anything that has forced this percentage up?

A: I think it's probably due in a great deal to housing patterns on the West Side of San Antonio.

Q: But the housing patterns—the people chose to move into this area. The state or the county or the school district didn't move them into there.

A: Not necessarily. Sometimes it was their only choice.

This brief question and response section of Avena's testimony is fascinating. Avena tried repeatedly to illustrate to the to the state's attorney, Mr. Bailey, that the state had created segregated housing patterns through racially restrictive covenants. Bailey, on the other hand, dodged those answers. He kept insinuating that the housing patterns just happened. The concentration of *mexicanos* into one area of town was a coincidence or because individuals chose to move into those areas. Avena countered: "Sometimes it was their only choice." For Bailey, there was no state-sponsored discriminatory treatment of *mexicanos*. Avena, having worked and researched in Texas, understood how housing discrimination operated in Texas. Deed restrictions mattered as did other mechanism not discussed in the testimony but no less relevant, such as the federal government's insinuation into the housing market through the FHA or VA. Avena understood that the segregated metropolis did not just happen, it was created by state action as well as individual behavior.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); José Cárdenas Deposition, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

The district court found the evidence compelling and ruled in favor of Rodriguez and the Edgewood parents on December 23, 1971. The court held that the Texas system of financing public education deprived poor and *mexicano* children of equal protection under the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. The court went on to say that “Within this ad valorem taxation system lies the defect which plaintiffs challenge. This system assumes that the value of property within the various districts will be sufficiently equal to sustain comparable expenditures from one district to another. It makes education a function of the local property tax base.” The court especially relied on Berke’s data to make their ruling. It ordered that the state find a “new form of financing” to “support public education.” But the court stayed its ruling for two years to give the Texas Legislature time to devise a new method.<sup>117</sup>

The two year stay allowed time for Texas to appeal directly to the Supreme Court, bypassing the Appeals Court, via a special procedure known as appellate jurisdiction.<sup>118</sup> Gochman became the Appellees while Texas, represented by experienced lawyer and constitutional scholar, Charles Alan Wright, were the Appellants. Gochman made two legal arguments: Texas’s school finance system discriminated against poor children in property poor districts and that education was a “fundamental interest” which should trigger the strict scrutiny test. Wright argued that wealth was not a suspect class as the district court had ruled and that

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<sup>117</sup> *Demetrio P. Rodriguez et al v. San Antonio Independent School District et al*, 299 F. Supp. 476 (W.D. Tex. 1969); Richard Avena Testimony, Box 603, E. 48W114A; Western District of Texas, San Antonio Civil Case Files; Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region (Fort Worth).

<sup>118</sup> Richard Valencia, *Chicano Students and the Courts: The Mexican American Legal Struggle for Educational Equality* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 347, footnote 74.

education was not a fundamental interest. The strict scrutiny test should not apply in this case.<sup>119</sup>  
In a 5-4 decision, on March 21, 1973, the Court sided with the State of Texas.

On the question of wealth as a suspect class, Justice Powell, writing for the majority argued, that:

In support of their charge that the system discriminates against the ‘poor,’ appellees have made no effort to demonstrate that it operates to the peculiar disadvantage of any class fairly definable as indigent, or as composed of persons whose incomes are beneath any designated poverty level. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the poorest families are not necessarily clustered in the poorest property districts.<sup>120</sup>

It is important to note that between the district court case and the Supreme Court oral arguments, Gochman enlisted the help of University of Texas law professor Mark Yudof. In his book on *Rodriguez*, Sracic argues that Yudof convinced Gochman to stick to a legal argument that defined the discriminatory treatment in class terms rather than race that had been part of the district court case. Sracic explains that although Avena testified created segregation through racially restrictive covenants, “this was one step away from claiming *de jure* segregation. Therefore, any legal argument that relied on race would have to overcome the hurdle of appearing, on its face, to be asking the Court to remedy the effects of not *de jure*, but *de facto* segregation.”<sup>121</sup> As illustrated in the district court case, race was *central* to understanding how segregation operated in a *mexicano* community such as San Antonio because it worked in tandem with class. Justice Powell seemed to believe that segregation by class—or race for that matter—was a zero-sum proposition.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez et al*, 411 U.S, at 23.

<sup>121</sup> Sracic, *San Antonio v. Rodriguez*, 82.

Justice Powell's opinion also illuminates how damaging the artificiality between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation has been in terms of seeking legal redress but also in everyday life. Avena, while good at bringing up deed restrictions, floundered when pressed to provide more *evidence* of state-sponsored discrimination. That is the thing. How does one provide evidence of state-sponsored discrimination in the housing market that is legible to the court? The discursive framework around the concept of *de jure/de facto* has served to obscure the ways in which the state, at every level, has reinforced and reproduced inequality in the housing market. As Matthew Lassiter has argued, "de facto segregation' means 'innocent segregation'—spatial landscapes and racial arrangements that exist beyond the scope of judicial remedy, attributable solely to private market forces in the absence of any historical or contemporary government responsibility."<sup>122</sup>

On the question of education as a fundamental right, the majority also disagreed. Justice Powell argued, "education, of course, is not among the rights afforded explicit protection under our Federal Constitution." He argued that even had he accepted the proposition that education was a fundamental right to be protected, Texas's system, while imperfect, afforded a minimum standard of education for all Texas residents. Furthermore, Justice Powell wrote, "the Equal Protection Clause does not require absolute equality or precisely equal advantage."<sup>123</sup>

Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote the lengthiest dissent for the Court.

The Court today decides, in effect, that a State may constitutionally vary the quality of education which it offers its children in accordance with the amount of taxable wealth located in the school districts within which they reside. . . . The majority's holding can

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<sup>122</sup> Matthew Lassiter, "De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth," in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, eds Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.

<sup>123</sup> *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez et al*, 411 U.S. at 35, 24.

only be seen as a retreat from our historic commitment to equality of educational opportunity and as unsupportable acquiesce in a system which deprives children in their earliest years of the chance to reach their full potential as citizens.<sup>124</sup>

Following Gochman's argument, Marshall understood the importance of education in facilitating a functioning democracy. This was one of the reasons why he brought up citizenship. To have a functioning democracy one needed informed voters. Education and schooling, and, in this instance, free public education, was the vehicle to preserving the system that he held dear. He also argued that Texas's argument that if differences in funding occurred, it was the district, not the individual students who were harmed. Justice Marshall responded, "the impact of that educational opportunity is dependent upon where they happen to live. . . . The Texas financing scheme discriminates, from a constitutional perspective, between schoolchildren on the basis of the amount of taxable property located within their local districts."<sup>125</sup>

Justice Marshall's most stinging critique came when he responded to the argument put forth by Texas that the remedy for the inequality seen in the Texas system would lead to a loss of a community's "local control" over school issues. Justice Marshall felt that the issue of local control was an excuse. Moreover, he argued that the system Texas had employed took local control away from the community's control into the hands of the state. Gochman made a similar argument that the only people who had local control over their situation were those in affluent schools because they could inject more money into their schools if the need arose. Poorer schools were at their limits. Thus, Marshall concluded, "it is apparent that the State's purported concern

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<sup>124</sup> *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez et al*, 411 U.S. at 70-71.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

with local control is offered primarily as an excuse rather than as a justification for interdistrict inequality.”<sup>126</sup>

Justice Powell suggested that state legislatures rather than the federal court were a better venue for ameliorating any inequality that existed because of public school financing schemes. Justice Marshall’s dissent was as prophetic as it was profound. In part, he concluded that

The Court’s suggestions of legislative redress and experimentation will doubtless be of great comfort to the schoolchildren of Texas’ disadvantaged districts but considering the vested interests of wealthy school districts in the preservation of the status quo, they are worth little more. The possibility of legislative action is, in all events, no answer to this Court’s duty under the Constitution to eliminate unjustified state discrimination.<sup>127</sup>

In Justice Marshall’s view the Court abdicated its responsibility to rectify the inequity that both sides agreed was present. The question was whether Texas met its minimum obligation which the Court found it did. He also understood that without clear guidance from the Court, the politics of localism and self-interest would stymie any possibility for redress the Edgewood school children, and by extension all poor school children across the county, had. Remedy through the federal court system would no longer be an option for school finance cases.

For the last thirty years since *Rodriguez*, the state court and legislature have engaged in a back and forth battle over adequate public-school funding that has been a legislative and legal quagmire. Justice Marshall understood that state and local politics and interests would animate future struggles for educational equality. On May 23, 1984 the Mexican American Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), along with Demetrio Rodriguez, filed suit district court in what would come to be known as *Edgewood v. Kirby (Edgewood I)*. MALDEF argued Texas’s school

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<sup>126</sup> *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez et al*, 411 U.S., at 126.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*.

finance system violated the state constitution. On April 29, 1987, Judge Clark agreed and held that:

- a) Education is a fundamental right
- b) Wealth is a suspect classification
- c) The existing school finance scheme in Texas is unconstitutionally inefficient
- d) The Constitution of Texas demand fiscal neutrality<sup>128</sup>

The court seemed to have given Demetrio Rodriguez and some of the original plaintiffs in *Rodriguez* (1969) a victory. The court gave the legislature a stay to pass legislation which occurred on June 7, 1990 with the passage of SB 1. It stipulated that “in all but the wealthiest five percent of the districts, there could be roughly no difference in the amount of money provided per student by local and state sources in districts that agreed to tax themselves at the same levels.”<sup>129</sup> This was challenged in court and found unconstitutional as was the legislature’s next scheme to create county education districts in *Edgewood II* (1991). In *Edgewood III* (1993), things got interesting. The Texas Legislature passed SB 7 which said “school districts in Texas wishing to collect state monies to supplement local property taxes had to tax themselves at a certain minimum level. Then, however, the legislation also provided for (once again voluntary) transfer of locally generated money from property rich districts to property poor districts.”<sup>130</sup> *Edgewood III* (1993) became colloquially known as Robin Hood but it was a misnomer. First because districts had to opt in to the program if they wanted state money. Second, the legislation afforded districts multiple options to deal with any money generated by property taxes per student over a given threshold. In those instances, districts could: a) consolidate with another

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<sup>128</sup> Richard Valencia, *Chicano Students and the Courts: The Mexican American Legal Struggle for Educational Equality* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 105.

<sup>129</sup> Sracic, 129.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

(poorer) district, b) detach some of their property, c) purchase daily attendance credits from another district, d) “contract for the education of nonresident students; or e) consolidate the district’s tax base with a property poor district.”<sup>131</sup>

Third, Robin Hood evinced a myth that poor districts were somehow stealing from rich districts when the opposite was true. The state-sponsored forces that protected white wealth and promoted homeownership—residential segregation, racially restrictive housing covenants, FHA loans, and more recently the home mortgage deduction, “an enormous subsidy to middle-class homeowners, the vast majority of whom are suburban and white”—greatly benefitted white middle class homeowners.<sup>132</sup> The “Robin Hood scenario” in this situation was the federal government stealing from the poor to subsidize the middle class and affluent homeowners. In *Edgewood III* (1993), poor people in property poor districts essentially wanted the redistribution of federal tax subsidies to be spread more equitably. In November 2005, Robin Hood was ruled unconstitutional. To this day, the Texas Legislature still has not found a way to equalize school funding because of the continuing legacy of residential segregation that pervade modern metropolises such as San Antonio.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 131. Sracic’s Chapter 10 helped me navigate the complicated waters of Texas school finance post *Rodriguez* (1973).

<sup>132</sup> Self, *American Babylon*, 329.

## Epilogue

In June 2016, I sat down with Robert Alvarado for an oral history interview with the Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project. We had heard of Alvarado through word of mouth. I could not find much information on him, so I did not know what to expect. Mr. Alvarado was a thin *mexicano* with a grey goatee who wore his grey hair tucked underneath a brown beret. On the front of the beret was a red circular patch that said “*carnalismo*” (brotherhood) in bold letters above a black United Farm Workers Aztec eagle emblem, La Huelga (The Strike). Inscribed underneath the eagle was “San Antonio, Texas.” Above the traditional cross rifle pin on the beret was a military insignia that represented a nod to the memory of his father who died in the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944. Alvarado was two when he died. Alvarado also wore a black leather vest with various pins on the front including two pictures of Cesar Chavez, a green “No Grapes” button, a metal peace symbol, and a “America con Hillary” campaign button on his right side. On the left was a simple dual Mexico/United States flag pin. Alvarado is a Brown Beret, a member of the “paramilitary organization committed to protecting the *barrio*” that emerged out of the Chicano Movement across the Southwest but did not blossom in San Antonio until August 1970.<sup>1</sup>

Juan Guajardo organized the first San Antonio Brown Beret chapter on the West Side. Between 1970-1972, other chapters emerged, mostly along neighborhood street gang lines. “Essentially,” David Montejano explains, “the first Beret organization was a confederation of

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Robert Alvarado, Interviewed by Vincio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/>.

chapters superimposed over the old gang boundaries of the West Side.”<sup>2</sup> The establishment of the Brown Berets and the “spirit of *carnalismo* brought peace, if not unity, to the *barrios* between constantly warring neighborhood gangs.”<sup>3</sup> In my interview with Diana Montejano, a former West Side Brown Beret, she recalled that the truce between the different *barrios* was “very precarious,” but *carnalismo* seemed to work for a while. She remembered that the Brown Berets “were all dressed like *soldados* (soldiers) [and] something about the discipline they seemed to have attracted me” to the organization. After speaking to Juan Guajardo about joining—the West Side Brown Berets did not include women initially—he encouraged her to get some “women who are truly committed” as Montejano. She remembered that she was “all militant. It was almost like I was going to join the Chicano version of the Weather Underground. You know, really. Go back to Malcolm X, by any means necessary. . . . [We] would have been labeled a terrorist [organization] today if we had actually carried out our plans the way we” envisioned. As a Chicana, Diana faced some initial skepticism about her joining the Brown Berets. But she persevered despite her difficulties adapting to the ““you’re going to do what I say”” mentality of her male compatriots.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Montejano, Alvarado was from the South Side chapter. Demographically the two *barrios* are similar; however, there was a far higher concentration of ethnic Mexicans on the West Side. See Figure 6.1.

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<sup>2</sup> David Montejano, *Quixote’s Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 124, 128.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Diana Montejano, Interviewed by Vinicio Sinta and Stephen Arionus, June 2016, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project, Texas Christian University, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/>. Hereinafter CRBB Interview.

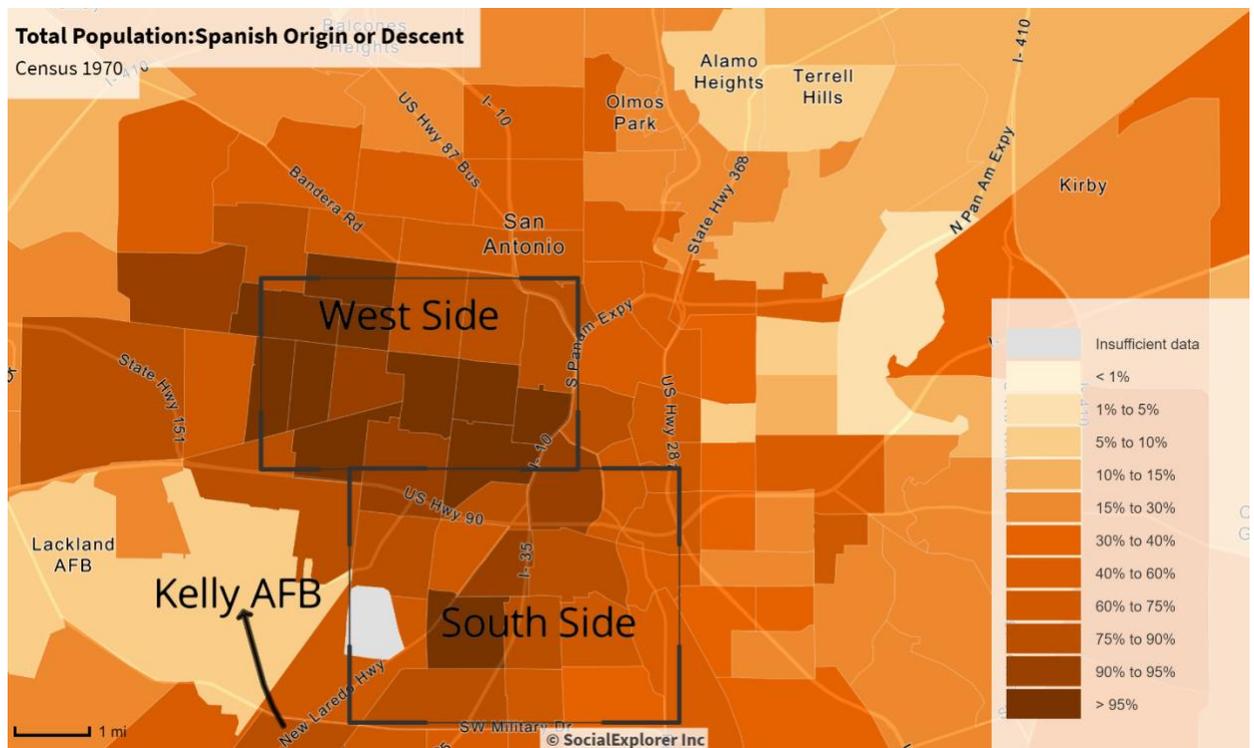


Figure 6.1: Total Population: Spanish Origin or Descent, 1970. Map Courtesy of Social Explorer.<sup>56</sup>

During the interview Alvarado was most animated about place and his home. Born in 1942, he lived on the South Side of San Antonio his entire life. He recalled that his was a “poor neighborhood. A regular working people neighborhood.” Alvarado attended Burbank High School which is in the San Antonio Independent School District. He recalled going to school without lunch at times because he could not afford the cost; this was prior to the free and reduced lunch program. However, Burbank had a program whereby students washed dishes for their lunch, which is how Alvarado met his (future) wife for the first time. He fell in love at first sight. Alvarado had to drop out of school in ninth grade to support himself. He worked odd jobs for money and eventually found employment with Pepsi Co. This allowed him the financial

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Total Population: Spanish Origin or Descent, 1970, Map Courtesy of Social Explorer. Note these boundaries are an approximation to orient the reader.

wherewithal to apply for an FHA home loan. In 1970, he bought a small ranch-style house on the South Side for \$13,300. Alvarado recalled that when he first moved in some of his German neighbors did not treat him too well. They would often ask him “how much do you charge to cut the grass” and sometimes put debris in his yard out of spite. Not all his neighbors were bad, however, because Mr. Pfiefer who lived a few doors down loved his wife’s tamales. Things got better as, “little by little,” the Anglo neighbors moved away, and neighborhood turnover occurred. Alvarado bought his home from a minister who previously had conducted marriage services in his home. People often stopped by Alvarado’s home to see if they could look at the house in which they were married. Alvarado carried on that tradition as his daughter and two sons were married at home. For Alvarado, his home, his family, and his neighborhood were his world.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of his activism with the Brown Berets in the early 1970s, Alvarado recalled attending meets, going to protests, and acting as security for large rallies. Much like other Brown Berets I interviewed, Alvarado remembered protesting police brutality. He also recalled that one of the community-oriented programs that the South Side Brown Berets launched was a rideshare whereby the Berets used two vehicles to transport community members to and from the grocery store. “It was just [for] neighborhood people,” Alvarado said. “Not people that we didn’t know.” And like Diana Montejano, Alvarado recalled that the Brown Berets “had meetings with the [gang] leaders and we finally broke them down. No fighting with each other. . . . We organized each other to get united.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Robert Alvarado, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Towards the end of the interview, Alvarado pulled out a large map of San Antonio. His neighborhood was marked in black. The house that he lived in for more than forty years is adjacent to Kelly Air Force Base (AFB). The other feature marked on the map was an amoeba-like plume of contaminated below ground water that enveloped entire communities as it oozed in a southeasterly direction from Kelly AFB toward the San Antonio River miles away. “Decades have passed since base officials discovered toxic plumes in the area’s groundwater, once stretching underneath more than 20,000 nearby homes many of which relied on private water wells.”<sup>9</sup> The Air Force acknowledged that it had dumped toxic chemicals such as trichloroethylene, a degreaser, and tetrachloroethylene, a paint stripper, into the ground. The Air Force has spent \$250,000,000 in cleanup thus far but does not expect to finish until 2041.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Alvarado believed that the fumes from the chemical spill have affected his health and those around him. Both his wife and daughter developed thyroid cancer. Alvarado’s own health is failing—a brain aneurism caused partial blindness and he had to have a kidney transplant. “I used to weigh 220, now I’m 140,” says a rail thin Alvarado during our interview.<sup>11</sup> He recalled one instance meeting with a doctor who asked him if he had travelled out of the country or been exposed to radiation to which Alvarado replied, “the only place I’ve been is Leon Creek [that] is full of radiation.”<sup>12</sup> Studies commissioned by San Antonio Metro Health found higher incidences of liver cancer in twelve zip codes near Kelly AFB, the Texas

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Barajas, “Questions Linger over Kelly AFB Contamination even after Property Changes Hands,” *San Antonio Current*, October 11, 2011, <https://www.sacurrent.com/sanantonio/questions-linger-over-kelly-afb-contamination-even-after-property-changes-hands/Content?oid=2241824>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Robert Alvarado, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Department of State Health Services has found evidence of increased birth abnormalities in the area, and the federal government's own agency, ATSDR, reported elevated rates of lung and kidney cancer.<sup>13</sup> "We call ourselves the living dead because we can't go nowhere," Alvarado said.<sup>14</sup> In 2006, Robert Alvarado and his group the Committee for Environmental Justice Action conducted a "Purple Cross Campaign" whereby they distributed purple crosses to homes in the area who had at least one family member diagnosed with cancer: "half of the [350] homes qualified for a purple cross."<sup>15</sup> Alvarado lamented that "a lot of the people he talked to ten years ago are already deceased."<sup>16</sup> The Air Force admitted to the dumping of chemicals and awarded families an average of \$1,300 per household.<sup>17</sup> Neither the Air Force nor environmental agencies ever established a causal link between the high incidences of cancer experienced in Alvarado's neighborhood and the toxic plume of contaminated ground water flowing beneath their homes which one can smell on a hot day.<sup>18</sup> According to Wilma Subra, a chemist and environmental health activist, the Toxic Triangle area qualifies as a "cancer cluster."<sup>19</sup> One study from Texas A&M explored the ways in which dietary habits such as eating corn tortillas might be responsible for the higher rates of cancer in the Toxic Triangle. The study faced widespread criticism.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of what the Air Force or other so-called experts have stated, the

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<sup>13</sup> "Crime Zone Cleanup," *San Antonio Current*, April 29, 2009, <https://www.sacurrent.com/sanantonio/crime-scene-cleanup/Content?oid=2285971>.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Robert Alvarado, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>15</sup> "Crime Zone Cleanup."

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Robert Alvarado, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>17</sup> Barajas, "Questions Linger over Kelly AFB Contamination."

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Robert Alvarado, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Claren, "The EPA's Stalin Era," *Salon*, November 11, 2008, [https://www.salon.com/2008/11/11/epa\\_2/](https://www.salon.com/2008/11/11/epa_2/).

<sup>20</sup> Tony Cantú, "Tortilla-cancer Link Study Could be Published Soon,"

survivors—the “living dead” as Alvarado described himself and his neighbors—of the Toxic Triangle believed that the military’s deliberate dumping of dangerous chemicals into the ground near their homes has caused people to get cancer in their community.

Robert Alvarado’s story encapsulates the dual tensions between agency and structure that my community study of the creation and maintenance of the West Side *barrio* in San Antonio has illustrated. The Air Force created an environmental catastrophe in Alvarado’s poor *mexicano* neighborhood, and they estimated that the cleanup will not be completed for another twenty years. That means they will have spent over forty years attempting to clean up their mess. Had this happened in upper-middle class Anglo neighborhoods such as Alamo Heights, Olmos Park, Terrell Hills, or, the ultrarich gated community, the Dominion in Northwest San Antonio, there is no way that the Air Force would slow walk the cleanup. As it is, Alvarado who is 77, will likely never see a resolution to a battle for environmental justice he has been waging for nearly twenty years.

To add insult to injury, even if Alvarado wanted to sell his home so he could enjoy his remaining years outside the Toxic Triangle, he would have a difficult time doing so. He suggested that he would have to disclose the fact that his home sits upon the Air Force’s chemical “contamination” spill which devalues the price of his home.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Alvarado and his neighbors live in a poor community. The per capita income for Alvarado’s district is less than \$11,000.<sup>22</sup> Many of Alvarado’s friends are elderly and likely lived fixed or limited incomes. How can they possibly afford to pick up and move? Alvarado has done everything right. He

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<https://www.mysanantonio.com/health/article/Tortilla-cancer-link-study-could-be-published-soon-843067.php>.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Robert Alvarado, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

<sup>22</sup> “Crime Scene Cleanup.”

bought a house with an FHA loan. He worked hard and raised a family. He lived the so-called “American Dream” yet he still cannot seem to get out from underneath the oppressive state: residential segregation created by public policy and reinforced by private attitudes, an unequal distribution of resources, and a history of an absent social welfare state in *mexicano* communities in San Antonio. Indeed, a 2012 Pew Research study found that San Antonio is one of the most economically segregated metropolises in the nation.<sup>23</sup>

Alvarado’s struggle for environmental justice was never about himself. “I don’t let [the fight for environmental justice] drop. I’m still holding on,” Alvarado said. He understood that his activism was not only about his life, and his health, but about future generations on the South Side. Alvarado continued, “there’s a next generation and a next generation . . . I got grandkids, you know? . . . I don’t want to walk [away] and just let them suffer.”<sup>24</sup> Alvarado’s story reminds me of other stories told throughout this dissertation. Eleuterio Escobar wanted to provide better educational opportunities for ethnic Mexicans on the West Side. Emma Tenayuca organized pecan shellers for better wages. Father Carmelo Tranchese helped bring public housing to San Antonio. Demetrio Rodriguez and Alberta Snid challenged the state of Texas at the Supreme Court and almost won educational equality for poor children everywhere. When I read these stories, I do not see communities in decline or defeated. I see individuals striving to make their communities just a little bit fairer, a little bit more just, and a little bit more democratic.

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Fry and Paul Taylor, “The Rise of Residential Segregation by Income,” August 1, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2012/08/Rise-of-Residential-Income-Segregation-2012.2.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Alvarado Interview, June 2016, CRBB Interview.

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