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Although Mexican Americans served in large numbers during World War II, for many years they had been left out of the story. In recent years, as historians have sought to write Mexican Americans back in to the World War II narrative, there have been differing opinions on the impact that World War II had on the Mexican-American fight for civil rights. In order to be able to analyze the influence of World War II on Mexican-American civil rights, we must specifically look at different spheres of racism. Without much influence from the war, Mexican-American civil rights groups had been fighting for equality in “official” arenas such as bureaucratic and institutional racism using the legal system before the war and continued to do so afterward. The fight against social racism followed a different trajectory. Mexican Americans had organized in years before World War II and fought for labor rights and in some cases for social equality. Although they were successful in attaining some of their demands, this success was more attributable to the need for their services than it was to changing perceptions about Mexican Americans. World War II was incredibly important to the Mexican-American fight against *social* inequality because the combination of the renewed hope and demands for equality on the part of returning Mexican-American veterans combined with the patriotic climate of World War II created an environment in which Mexican-American veterans could demand equality based off of the veteran status.

MEXICAN-AMERICAN VETERANS, CLASS, AND IDENTITY DURING
AND AFTER WORLD WAR II

by
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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that between 250,000 to 750,000 Latinos served in the United States armed forces during World War II.¹ Exact numbers are not available due to fact that legally Mexican-Americans were classified as Caucasian and so separate classifications were not made in regard to their military service records. We will never know exactly how many Mexican-Americans fought in World War II. Mexican-American service numbers were high and their service had a strong impact on their self-view and expectations. The introspection and changes in self-view that came about as a result of World War II pushed Mexican-American veterans to fight for equal treatment. In recent years, many scholars have made great efforts to write Mexican Americans back into the World War II narrative and demonstrate their contribution to the War. This thesis builds on their research but rather aims to analyze the ways in which World War II influenced the civil rights battle Mexican-Americans had begun fighting before the War, in the postwar years.

In order to analyze the evolution of the Mexican-American civil rights movement, Mexican-American involvement in World War II is of high importance because veterans had felt that through their dedication and sacrifice they had earned the right to full American citizenship. Mexican-American veterans' individual experiences serving in the War changed the way they saw themselves and in turn the way they expected others to see and treat them in the United States. Mexican-American veterans felt that their

¹ "Project Background," at <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/voces/about-project-bg.html> This number is for all Spanish-surnamed soldiers. ;Zaragoza Vargas, *Crucible of Struggle: A History of Mexican Americans from Colonial Times to the Present Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 255. Vargas estimates that numbers were upwards of half a million Mexican American service members.

participation and actions were equal in heroism and sacrifice to those of Anglos and Mexican-American soldiers felt they had earned the right to equal treatment at home. Wartime services and experiences influenced the way Mexican-Americans thought, what they felt they deserved, and their expectations for life in the United States.

In his book *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, George J. Sánchez discusses the development of Mexican American identity. Sánchez argues that while most Chicano literature has viewed World War II as a watershed period for Mexican-Americans, he believes that much of Mexican-American identity and sense of self was already shaped before the Second World War.² Sánchez is correct in arguing that the Mexican-American community in the United States had long been developing a distinctive culture and sense of self and had also been attempting to assimilate into Anglo culture especially through use of the English language and formal education even before World War II.³ Sánchez's underestimation of the impact of World War II on Mexican-Americans is more than likely because his examination of the World War II period focuses on MAM (or the Mexican American Movement), which mainly consisted of middle to upper class Mexican Americans. Even before the War, middle and upper-class Mexican Americans had been forming civil rights groups and fighting formal channels of racism such as segregation. With or without World War II, this class of Mexican Americans had been fighting and using the legal realm and continued to do so during and after the War. Working-class Mexican Americans, on the other hand, did not have a platform or needed skills and tools (such as education levels or legal knowledge) to combat

² George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press), 256.

³ Sánchez, 253-269.

inequality in a manner that Anglos would recognize before the War. After World War II, however, working-class Mexican-American veterans both felt empowered and had a platform as veterans not receiving equal benefits, which they could use and build upon to demand equality in other areas of their lives as well. A social class lens demonstrates that World War II had more of an impact on working-class Mexican-American veterans' social consciousness and subsequent actions than it did for middle and upper-class Mexican-Americans.

The argument of this thesis is not to say that working-class Mexican Americans had not been effectively combatting inequality in the years before World War II. Mexican and Mexican American laborers had effectively organized and demanded change in the labor realm. This thesis, however, seeks more to analyze the realm of social inequality rather than specifically address labor inequality. I also seek to analyze the ways in which Anglos were accepting and responding positively to the "veteran argument" in the years following the war. Although in years preceding the war, farm laborers were able to attain many of their demands through walk-outs and strikes, Anglo bosses consented because they needed the labor rather than due to changing perceptions about the rights of Mexican Americans. This thesis will argue that not only did the perceptions and expectations of working-class Mexican Americans change during the war years but equally important was that Anglos were also gradually becoming more receptive to changes. Mostly in regard to Mexican-Americans who were veterans, due to the patriotic climate of the United States during and following World War II.

The differences in the way upper and working-class Mexican Americans fought discrimination can be seen as separate factions within a larger movement. In *No Mexicans Women or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, Cynthia E. Orozco draws from various social movement theorists to define a social movement as:

Collective organized actions by a significant number of people with a shared identity and outside organizations representing a group (social category) with a collective identity seeking to assert its will as historical actors to challenge an existing situation or status for the purpose of a collective goal over a specific time or era.⁴

Based on her definition of a social movement, Orozco argues that while many historians have highlighted the World War II period as the starting point of the Mexican American social movement, she believes that the Mexican-American civil rights movement began in 1920 and lasted until 1965.⁵ Orozco acknowledges the importance of World War II in the Mexican-American trajectory but like Sánchez views a lengthier period of civil rights action. Orozco argues that within the larger Mexican American civil rights movement there were numerous chronologically defined sub-movements that took place, one of which was the movement in the years surrounding World War II. Orozco's argument that a larger Mexican American movement had been in progress since the 1920s and that there was a sub-movement within the larger fight during the World War II period is in line with the argument of this thesis. More specifically Douglas Monroy places greater emphasis on the significance of World War II and argues in his conclusion of *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* that

⁴ Cynthia E. Orozco, *No Mexicans Women or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 185.

⁵ Orozco, 186, 188.

World War II was the “greatest event” in the Mexican American trajectory.⁶ Many Mexican Americans served in the military and “came back as Americans.”⁷ What was principally important was the change that Mexican Americans felt within themselves. After serving in the War they saw themselves as fully American and felt that they deserved the full benefits that went along with American citizenship.

Racism can be manifested in many ways. For this thesis I divide my analysis into two different arenas of racism. I define *social racism* as being treated unequally and unfairly in personal realms, this form of racism I define as being based from personal opinions and social codes but not enforced or changeable through formal channels. Eradicating social racism is only possible when the actors inflicting racism begin to have internal changes within themselves and become willing to think and act differently. *Official racism* is the umbrella term I use to define racism that is enforced by laws and policies. This includes bureaucratic and institutional racism as well as formal segregation. Creating change in the realm of official racism often requires legal action. I argue that Mexican-Americans had to use different tactics in combatting social and official racism. Even so, these separate battles co-existed and often overlapped.

The Mexican-American fight against social racism that surrounded World War II was possible largely because of the nature of the war that Americans were fighting overseas. In *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, Gary Gerstle notes that because of America’s involvement in what came to be known as the “Good War,” Americans were convinced of the “goodness and benevolence” of their

⁶ Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles From the Great Migration to the Great Depression*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 257-258.

⁷ Monroy, 260.

nation.⁸ Gerstle goes on to argue that as Americans thought about the racism that was taking place in Germany, intellectuals began to confront racism in the United States, which had become impossible to ignore.⁹ Gerstle argues for the importance of minority Americans fighting against American racism while in the midst of war: “That this attack on racism occurred in a war setting helped to insure that the assault would be framed in patriotic terms.¹⁰ Eliminating racism would help Americans realize their most deeply cherished ideals—equality, freedom, democracy.”¹¹ Gerstle’s assessment of the significance of the World War II rhetoric of the “good war,” helps us to understand how, as Mexican Americans fought racism head on, veterans’ groups such as the American GI Forum used the rhetoric of patriotism and democracy common during World War II as a justification for why they deserved equality in America.

Historians acknowledge that although Mexican Americans felt they would return to better treatment in the United States after demonstrating commitment to their country through military service, explicit racism towards Mexican Americans, even veterans, continued to be commonplace.¹² Lizabeth Cohen’s *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* is a standout in her analysis of the *implicit* racism minorities faced in the years following World War II. Cohen’s study argues that

⁸ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 187.

⁹ Gerstle, 192.

¹⁰ Mexican Americans fighting for civil rights during and after World War II had a similar mindset and used similar tactics as did African Americans fighting for equality during the period. The Double V campaign championed by African Americans during the War fought for both victory overseas against inequality and hate as well as victory at home in the United States against racism and hate. Both of these wartime civil rights battles fought by African Americans and Mexican Americans argued that after their participation in the war effort, they had earned the rights to full American citizenship and the benefits that came along with it.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 193.

¹² Among many other books a discussion of this can be found in Juan Gómez Quiñones’s *Chicano Politics: Reality & Promise 1940-1990* and Zaragosa Vargas’s *Crucible of Struggle: A History of Mexican Americans from Colonial Times to the Present Era*.

because of unequal access to the GI Bill of Rights' benefits, the Bill "orchestrated much less social engineering than it promised and has been given credit for."¹³ Not being able to reap the full benefits of the GI Bill, both implicitly and explicitly, further pushed Mexican-American veterans to seek equality.¹⁴

There were two distinct types of inequality against which Mexican Americans fought but different groups of Mexican Americans focused on different areas of injustice. I argue that middle-to upper-class Mexican American civil rights groups generally fought against bureaucratic and institutional forms of discrimination, inequality that required legal action to change. This could include but is not limited to actions such as desegregating schools and taking issues of discrimination to the courts. Working-class Mexican Americans, emboldened by their military service, actively stood up against social forms of racism both alone and in groups. I define social racism as being treated differently because of race based on personal preference and social code but not segregated or treated differently because of rules or laws.

¹³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 156.

¹⁴ There were various obstacles in the face of Mexican Americans who wanted to take advantage of the benefits of the G.I. Bill. Cohen's study argues that the G.I. Bill was responsible for less social mobility (in general, not just for minorities) than it was given credit and examines the implicit obstacles to use of the G.I. Bill. She argues that most returning veterans who used the G.I. Bill for college were already high school graduates and some even had some college under their belts. She cites studies supporting her argument that demonstrate only 10 percent of the 10,000 veterans questioned stated that they "definitely" could not have attended college without the G.I. Bill and 10 percent said "probably" not. Cohen states that 55 percent of World War II veterans had less than a high school diploma and so many of them used the G.I. Bill for vocational schools rather than formal education. She argues that the G.I. Bill helped lead to better paying working-class jobs rather than propelling already working-class veterans into the middle-class and that already middle-class and better educated veterans were those who were able to take full advantage of the G.I. Bill. On the other hand, explicitly, in his *Latino Americans: The 500-Year Legacy That Shaped a Nation*, Ray Suarez claims that colleges and universities admitted few "blacks and Latinos." In his *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution*, Carl Allsup discusses the Texas Veterans Administration taking so long to distribute benefits that veterans were forced to drop out of courses they could not pay for otherwise.

A large part of the Mexican-American civil rights battle was for members of the community to publicly acknowledge that racism, and especially social racism, was a prevalent problem. Critical Race Theory is a strong lens through which this fight can be viewed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* argues that racism must be acknowledged in order to be defeated.¹⁵ Critical Race Theory's attention to the significance of public acknowledgement provides a lens through which historians can view the Pete Hernandez trial in which Mexican Americans, although legally classified as Caucasian, fought to be protected under the Fourteenth Amendment. "*Colored Men*" and "*Hombres Aqui:*" *Hernandez v. Texas* and the *Emergence of Mexican-American Lawyering* by Michael A. Olivas and *White but Not Equal* by Ignacio M. García have chronicled the Hernandez case. Hernandez's situation was the first civil rights battle that Mexican-American civil rights groups took to the United States Supreme Court. In this particular situation Mexican-American lawyers fought for the protection of the Fourteenth Amendment in order for Americans with Mexican surnames to no longer be excluded from participation in trial juries.¹⁶ This groundbreaking victory was crucial to the Mexican-American fight against what I am calling *official* forms of racism. Events like the Hernandez case demonstrate the mainstream Mexican-American civil rights struggle largely pioneered by middle-to upper-class Mexican Americans.

¹⁵ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Ignacio M. García, *White but Not Equal*. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009). And Michael A. Olivas. "*Colored Men*" and "*Hombres Aqui:*" *Hernandez v. Texas* and the *Emergence of Mexican-American Lawyering*. (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2006). Although in this particular situation we are speaking about the implications of the case for Mexican-Americans, in general the case was important for many minority groups in that it determined that the 14th Amendment applies to all races and ethnic groups in regards to equal protection in the United States.

World War II brought Mexican-American veterans, many of whom were working-class, into the Mexican-American civil rights struggle more than any other event because they began to unify through veterans groups and fight for equality they felt they had earned as a result of their service. Both Henry J. Ramos's *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* and Carl Allsup's *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution* have narrated the creation of the American GI Forum, the most active Mexican-American veterans' civil rights group to emerge from World War II. Along with Patrick J. Carroll's *Felix Longoria's Wake: Bereavement, Racism, and the Rise of Mexican American Activism* these books have surveyed the case of Private Felix Longoria, a Mexican-American veteran whose widow was refused access to the only funeral parlor in Three Rivers, Texas because of their Mexican descent. Longoria's death and the subsequent events not only gave momentum to the American GI Forum but to the entire Mexican-American civil rights movement as a whole. Longoria's story is important in the fight against social racism, no legal battles were fought and no laws were changed but the refusal to provide an honorable burial to a fallen soldier struck a chord for Americans who had just fought the "good war."¹⁷

This thesis will contribute to the existing literature on the Mexican-American experience in World War II and their civil rights movement in the years surrounding the War in two ways. An analysis of Mexican-American veterans' perceptions of racism and the disjuncture between the inequality they faced and the inequality they acknowledged will demonstrate the struggle of Mexican Americans coming to terms with their own experiences of inequality. Second, my analysis is new in its breakdown of the Mexican-American civil rights battle in the years before, during, and closely following World War

¹⁷ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*.

II into the two separate arenas of official/social racism and their relation to class. I argue that the fight against official discrimination, largely fought by middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans and the struggle against social racism, fought by all classes of Mexican Americans were approached differently. Based on these two units of analysis, I also argue that although Mexican Americans were emboldened by World War II, the battle against *institutional* racism would have likely occurred when it did with the same outcomes regardless of the War. However, the victories attained fighting against *social* racism in the years following World War II would not have been reached at that time had it not been for America's involvement in the Second World War.

Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* is an especially relevant piece of my argument regarding social racism and veterans' perception and acknowledgement of that specific arena of inequality. Festinger argues that human beings desire internal consistency. When two or more elements do not fit together, they are dissonant. Dissonance is uncomfortable and so individuals attempt to lessen it when it occurs, if they cannot actually change their situation and reduce the dissonance then they will choose to adjust the cognitive element responsible for understanding their reality and ignore the factor creating the dissonance.¹⁸ Festinger states that "the maximum dissonance that can possibly exist between any two elements is equal to the total resistance to change of the less resistant element."¹⁹ For Mexican Americans who were subject to discrimination and poor treatment, internal dissonance was taking place in various ways. First, Mexican Americans were forced to reconcile the inequality and difficulty that racism caused in their lives with being encouraged by Mexican-American

¹⁸ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1,12,21.

¹⁹ Festinger, 28.

civil rights groups to not blame their problems on racism. Second, they had to balance feeling that they were human beings that deserved equality and fair treatment with a daily reality that demonstrated to them that Anglos around them felt that they did not. The other difficulty posed by acknowledging that they were being treated unequally was that then they would have to acknowledge that there was a reason for the treatment that they were fighting against; this would mean acknowledging that they were a group different from Anglos, which was the exact opposite of how they wanted Anglos to view them.

The two pieces of my thesis are strung together through a social-class analysis. Mexican-American civil rights groups were elitist. Both the Mexican American Movement and LULAC sought out successful or at least promising members. They placed a high emphasis on the importance of education and success as a path toward being fully accepted into mainstream American society. Members of these groups had attained at least some level of success and were ready to fight against official channels of racism. They felt that they deserved equality and that they had become educated and successful enough that they were entitled to that right. Working-class Mexican Americans were facing double oppression, they were both a minority race and impoverished. For these Mexican Americans who were also members of a lower social sphere, acknowledging racism meant acknowledging difference. I believe they felt this would further alienate them especially from Anglo Americans but also from upper-class Mexican Americans. Although there are exceptions, for most of them, it was not until contributing to the war effort during World War II, that these working-class Mexican Americans felt they could argue, fight, and demand better just as middle- and upper-

class felt they could upon becoming educated and attaining various levels of success. I argue that the upper-class Mexican Americans had felt that they had earned the rights to demand full American citizenship well before the war as they had become educated, successful, and English-speaking. Working-class Mexican-American veterans on the other hand felt that they earned the right to demand equality after serving in World War II because their contribution made them feel as if they were part of something, less apart, and like they had something to be proud of. These changes bolstered their confidence in a way that they had not experienced before.

This thesis investigates the question of the impact of World War II on the civil rights consciousness of veterans through an examination of oral history. My subjects are male Mexican-American World War II veterans and the majority of primary source research is from oral history interviews and to a lesser extent I have used letters written by Mexican-American veterans. Sadly, as there are few surviving World War II veterans I was unable to interview subjects myself. The interviews I used were conducted within the last fifteen years and made available through the University of Texas' VOCES Oral History Project and the Kansas Historical Society, some in the form of videotapes and others through transcripts. Within each respective collection, interviewees started with a standard set of questions about their experiences before, during, and after World War II. The majority of interviews in the VOCES collection were conducted by journalism students at the University of Texas at Austin under the direction of Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. At the inception of the VOCES project, members of the team interviewed people they knew and then were referred to other veterans with each additional interview.

Through these interviews, Mexican-American veterans spoke of their first-hand experiences before, during, and after World War II. While both collections had a general set of questions in their interviews, perhaps the most telling information in using these interviews as a research tool was provided when interviewees brought up subjects not asked about by their interviewers or focused on a specific experience when the interviewer had already moved on. The amount of time and attention the veterans chose to dedicate to each part of their interview was demonstrative of what veterans held to be highly important or powerful in their lives. Interviewees' assessments of their own lack of discriminatory treatment initially surprised me, but began to make sense in light of the class dynamics of the Mexican-American civil rights movement and through the lens of the theory of cognitive dissonance. Most interview subjects began their lives in lower socioeconomic classes and did not actively participate in organizations such as LULAC and MAM but were exposed to and aware of these groups, which were led by middle- to upper-class Mexican Americans.

The interviews used for this paper come from men who grew up, had military training, and lived in various states throughout the United States. Most common among them were Arizona, Texas, California, New Mexico, and Kansas. Interviews of veterans from multiple states demonstrate that patterns of racism spanned the United States during the World War II period. Evidence from interviews demonstrates that racism seemed to be most prevalent in Texas but was also common throughout all regions of the United States that had Latino populations. Because of the high level of discrimination in Texas, many of the biggest Mexican-American civil rights battles came

out of Texas but their results had influence and implications for all Latino communities in the United States.

In an attempt to limit repetition, I use the terms Mexican American, Latino, and Hispanic interchangeably unless specifically mentioned otherwise. If I were also addressing other Latino groups in this thesis I would not use the all-encompassing terms Hispanic and Latino as this would create confusion. However, since my subjects are solely of Mexican descent, I feel it appropriate for this study to use these terms interchangeably. Due to the fact that those who were not American citizens who served in the United States military often had more “streamlined” paths toward naturalization and many of my subjects were naturalized while serving or later on in their lives, they are included in the scope of this paper.²⁰ I have not included Mexicans who served in the military but intended to return to or those who did return to Mexico because my aim is to examine the experiences of those who sought to stay in the United States and their attempts to be fully accepted into American society.

The four parts of this thesis examine the Mexican-American civil rights struggle through the lens of the legal fight for equality led by middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans, Mexican-American veterans’ perceptions and acknowledgement of racism, the impact discrimination in education had on Mexican-Americans military experiences, and the powerful impact World War II had on returning Mexican-American veterans’ expectations. The purpose of the first part of my argument is to demonstrate that Mexican-American Civil Rights groups such as LULAC and MAM had been active in fighting discrimination and institutional racism since before the Second World War. Part

²⁰ Dionicio Valdes, *Mexican Americans & World War II*, ed. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 121-122.

one will also demonstrate the patterns of civil rights consciousness that were established by middle-class groups. This section draws primarily on secondary literature as the focus of my primary research was working-class Mexican Americans who were generally not part of these groups. The legal civil rights cases led by upper-class Mexican Americans need to be explored in order to analyze the juxtaposition between the fight for equality in regard to social and official racism and the differences and cross-over between the movements. The second part of my thesis focuses on my subjects' perceptions of racism and inequality in various spheres of their lives both in bureaucratic and social arenas and seeks to understand why veterans often did not recall their experiences of poor treatment as attributable to racism. Part three is an analysis of the commonality of seeing Hispanic surnamed soldiers as less intelligent and placing Latino soldiers in the infantry, both implicitly because they had not had the educational opportunities in their youth that Anglo soldiers had and explicitly refusing to accept the intellectual credentials of Mexican-American soldiers that were educated. Part four analyzes the powerful effect World War II military service had on Mexican Americans in changing their expectations about what they felt they deserved as American veterans. I also argue that World War II created a new channel through which Mexican-American veterans could demand equality not just at the institutional level but also socially. It is in this section that I argue without serving in World War II, Mexican American would not have been able to make the advances against social racism that they did in the years following World War II. The themes of social class and the differences in methods in fighting institutional discrimination and social racism carry throughout the four-part structure of this thesis.

Chapter one analyzes the longstanding idea among Mexican-American civil rights groups that assimilation would be their path to acceptance in Anglo culture. Even as Hispanics sought to be accepted into Anglo American culture through various methods such as use of the English language and formal education, in general, they continued to be rejected by whites. As an elite class of Mexican Americans developed in Texas, they used their education and skills to rally for change and improvement against bureaucratic racism. In facing this battle, Mexican Americans found that taking their battles to the courts was an effective method as they could use fact rather than persuasion. At the same time that upper class Mexican Americans were leading the predominant civil rights groups in actively fighting against institutional discrimination, they encouraged Hispanics to turn their cheek when confronted with social racism.

Chapter two analyzes Mexican-American perceptions of occasions when they experienced racism and inequality in order to better understand their paths toward points in their lives when they more staunchly demanded equality. In some instances, interview subjects clearly recognized and acknowledged that in specific experiences they were victims of racism. However it was just as common if not even more so for Mexican-American veterans to recount a story that to a present-day outsider would clearly seem to be discrimination and state that they did not believe they were treated differently because they were Latino. This chapter will also review the commonality of Mexican Americans choosing to not directly acknowledge discrimination and racism. Civil Rights groups at the time encouraged Mexican Americans to combat racism but to do so hopefully without dwelling on it as a crutch to blame for their “shortcomings.”²¹ It is possible that they did not acknowledge every form of discrimination because they

²¹ Sánchez, 259, 260.

were not completely sure of the rights to which they were entitled.²² Although Mexican Americans experienced racism differently from each other, it was most difficult for them to address and combat social racism as it was not as tangible as bureaucratic discrimination. Not only was social racism more difficult to combat, the Mexican-American civil rights movement led by the middle-class encouraged Mexican Americans not to focus on social racism. As a result Mexican Americans tended to not acknowledge the racism that they experienced. Fighting social racism would mean changing people's hearts and minds as opposed to changing laws and regulations. This chapter sets up a foundation of how difficult of an issue social racism was to combat.

Although chapter two focuses on veterans' perceptions of inequality it is just as importantly about presenting the stories of the inequality they faced and how those experiences affected their lives. Chapter three builds on chapter two but narrows in on the inequality Mexican Americans faced as children in school and how the less-than-ideal educational opportunities influenced their later military careers. This chapter also touches on the difference in opportunities available to working- and upper-class Mexican-American youth in regards to education. Chapter three begins by looking at the various childhood struggles Mexican-American youth faced from being forced to drop out of school to help support their families, to being discriminated against in school, to Hispanic children who did have strong financial foundations that allowed them to complete high school and even college. Interview subjects used for this thesis, in general, felt that it was common for Mexican-American soldiers to be placed in the infantry regardless of their skillsets. Even highly educated Mexican-American soldiers

²² Carroll, 129,130. This is an idea of Dr. Hector P. Garcia discussed in Carroll's book.

had the validity of their degrees challenged and had to overcome preconceptions to be placed in units of their expertise. Mexican-American soldiers were not segregated in the military during World War II but interview subjects felt that their positions and opportunities were often limited by Anglo assumptions about Mexican-American's intelligence levels. This social discrimination affected Mexican-American veterans who felt that if they were going to put their lives at risk, they deserved equal military opportunities and took notice of the fact that they were not receiving that.

Chapter four argues that the political climate of World War II pushed Mexican-American veterans to demand improved treatment on a social level. Mexican Americans who had long sought the full rights of citizenship as American citizens hoped that after fighting in a war focused on democracy and equality they would return to a more just America. When Mexican-American veterans, who now felt that they had earned equality, returned to a country that had not improved, they were no longer willing to accept the second-class treatment to which they had long been accustomed. Mexican-American veterans justified their demands for social equality on the basis of their military service. Of equal importance were the patriotic attitudes prevalent due to America's participation in World War II which made Anglo Americans in general, more receptive to Mexican-American veterans groups' demands. American participation in World War II and the rhetoric of the democratic nature of the war were an integral part of the advances in the fight against social racism that took place during this period.

This thesis is full of anecdotes and stories that at points may seem excessive. The reason for this is twofold. One, I felt it important to demonstrate that my analyses were the rule and not the exception and in order to do so I felt I needed to make a

thorough representation of the evidence and interviews available. Two, what is history if not telling the stories of those who have not been able to tell their own? As much as an analysis and argument is valuable in furthering understanding I also wanted to be able to intertwine analysis with the experiences and heroic stories of my subjects who were not only brave in World War II but also in fighting hate and extreme prejudice at home. I felt that in order to do them justice and earn the right to use their lives' stories, I had to tell them holistically.

CHAPTER 1

THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN “TALENTED TENTH’S” FIGHT AGAINST BUREAUCRATIC RACISM AND THE FIGHT FOR “THE EQUALITY WHICH THE STATE GIVES”

Historians have differing opinions on the influence of World War II on the trajectory of Mexican-American civil rights. This can be attributed to the fact that historians have largely viewed Mexican Americans as one single group and their civil rights fight has been analyzed as one cohesive movement. When historians analyze Mexican Americans by class differences and their fight for civil rights is broken down into the fight against issues of institutional and social racism, World War II can be contextualized within the Mexican-American civil rights movement much more clearly.

Although upper-class Mexican Americans had fought for civil rights before World War II, wartime experiences emboldened a different class of returning veterans to fight for equality after the War. World War II was integral in the fight against social racism, but middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans and the groups they led, such as MAM and LULAC had a long-established pattern of focusing on fighting institutional issues of racism and segregation rather than focusing on social racism. The tactics and action taken against inequality in the bureaucratic sphere of life were less influenced by the War than were the tactics used to combat social racism. Demonstrating that Mexican Americans would have likely made similar levels of progress in fighting bureaucratic racism to what that they did with or without World War II.

This chapter does not focus on the impact World War II had on the fight for Mexican-American civil rights. Rather, this section is an analysis of the action that was taking place against official channels of racism before, during, and after World War II that was minimally influenced by the war that was taking place at the same time. The lack of impact World War II had on the Mexican-American fight for equality in official realms will in later chapters be contrasted with the strong impact World War II *did* have in regard to social racism.

Prior to the Second World War, Mexican-American civil rights groups such as the Mexican American Movement and the League of United Latin American Citizens emphasized assimilationist principles as the best path to being accepted into Anglo society. Both MAM and LULAC in principally seeking out a professional class to be among the ranks of their membership had ideas similar to that of W.E.B Du Bois in his “The Talented Tenth” essay:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst.²³

Members of both organizations felt that it would be less difficult for Anglos to first grant acceptance into their culture to Mexican Americans who were educated, professional, and successful, only then would the “talented tenth” of Mexican Americans be able to help the rest among them. Mexican Americans like African Americans, also had a large gap between their lowest classes and elites. It was the educated upper class of

²³ W.E.B Du Bois “The Talented Tenth,” September 1903. Available at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-talented-tenth/>.

Mexican Americans, especially formally trained lawyers, who led the fight against political and formal channels of discrimination.

The Mexican American Movement or MAM, which operated from 1934 to 1950 emerged from the YMCA in southern California and was comprised of young second-generation Mexican Americans.²⁴ For its members, MAM was selective and sought out young men who appeared to be likely to succeed. Sánchez notes that MAM sought out Mexican-American adolescents with protestant backgrounds, who were on a path toward success, participated in organized activities, and stood out as potential leaders among their peers.²⁵ For the young men in the organization, they “felt it was imperative to acknowledge that they had no divided loyalties between Mexico and the United States. They considered themselves fully American citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities that citizenship implied.”²⁶ Members of MAM hoped that through their demonstration of complete commitment to their American citizenship, Anglos would accept them into American culture.

MAM encouraged assimilation and highly valued education believing it to be the most powerful weapon Mexican Americans could use in the fight against racism. In an issue of *Mexican Voice*, a publication of MAM, author José Rodríguez wrote: “Education is the only tool which will raise our influence, command the respect of the rich class, and enable us to mingle in their social, political, and religious life” he continued “EDUCATION is our *only weapon!*”²⁷ Civil Rights conscious Mexican Americans knew

²⁴ Sánchez, 255.

²⁵ Sánchez, 256.

²⁶ Sánchez, 262.

²⁷ Sánchez, 257.

the value of education and strove to educate themselves to the highest level within their reach.

Due to the fact that Mexican-American civil rights groups often encouraged Latinos to participate in the American system in order to be assimilated into the culture, it is easy to interpret individuals' actions as nothing more than assimilationist. In *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles From the Great Migration to the Great Depression*, Douglas Monroy argues that what has often been called assimilation to American culture has actually been an expression of assertiveness and opposition.²⁸ Victory for Mexican Americans in their civil rights battle would require participation in the American system and formal education was a large piece of that participation. MAM members had attained high levels of education and success in hopes that this would lead to assimilation, when it did not, they used the skills they had acquired to demand acceptance.

Just as MAM emphasized the importance of assimilation and success through education and professionalism so too did the League of United Latin American Citizens or LULAC.²⁹ Professor J. Luz Saenz and Alonso S. Perales founded LULAC in 1926. After much contemplation and finally a meeting on February 17, 1929 two other Mexican American civil rights groups merged with LULAC, they were the Order of the Sons of America and The Order of the Knights of America.³⁰ LULAC principally consisted of Hispanic professionals who highlighted the importance of American

²⁸ Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles From the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 258.

²⁹ Patrick J. Carroll, *Felix Longoria's Wake: Bereavement, Racism, and the Rise of Mexican American Activism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 123-124.

³⁰ Carroll, 122-123.

patriotism, the use of the English language, and attaining formal education.³¹ LULAC members believe that “through hard work, economic advancement, education, and patriotism” they would quickly be accepted into American society.³²

Mexican American LULACers, who were concerned with being accepted into Anglo society, feared that having Mexican national immigrants amongst their ranks would make it more difficult for them to be received as fully equal in American culture. LULAC was not alone among Mexican-American civil rights groups in feeling hostile toward recent immigrants. In the early years of the American G.I. Forum, they did not support undocumented Mexican workers in the United States because they felt that their presence in the United States was a detriment to how Anglos viewed Mexican Americans. As impoverished Mexican immigrants sought economic opportunities in the United States, they were unlikely to confront their oppressive employers out of fear of deportation.³³ Anglos had a hard time distinguishing Mexican Americans from undocumented Mexican laborers so they often treated them as one group.

During World War II, the Bracero program brought even more unskilled Mexican labor into the United States. Along with the entrance of legal Bracero workers were many more undocumented Mexicans seeking a better life.³⁴ Speaking about undocumented Mexican workers Louis Silva who identified more as an American than a Mexican said:

Maybe I shouldn't say it, but I'm really strictly against so many illegal people. We've got illegal people here, and they come in and take all our jobs. Then

³¹ Ibid, 123.

³² Ibid. Carroll notes that he is summarizing Benjamin Márquez's *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization*.

³³ Henry A. J. Ramos, *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1998), 67.

³⁴ Ramos, 68.

we've got people that were born and raised here who can't find a job when all these people get all the jobs...I'm an American citizen; I was born and raised here, but maybe I shouldn't talk like that about my people, but I don't approve of them coming here and taking over.³⁵

Not only did Mexican Americans feel that the influx of cheap labor drove down wages and job opportunities for Mexican Americans but also Anglos tended to group undocumented Mexican workers and Mexican Americans together. Americans of Mexican descent saw undocumented Mexican immigrants as a threat to the way Anglos saw Mexican Americans. They feared Anglos generalizing them as Mexicans and sought to set themselves apart from Mexican immigrants. Mexican Americans who wanted to establish themselves as middle-class American citizens felt they had to make themselves clearly differentiable from the lower-class field laborers who –even when the United States government accepted and even requested their admittance into the country as laborers – Anglos were accustomed to treating with disdain. Their mindset is illustrated by looking at the situation through Tomás R. Jiménez's theory of ethnic replenishment.

Tomás R. Jiménez analyzes the complicated status of Mexican Americans in the United States in his book *Replenished Ethnicity: Mexican Americans, Immigration, and Identity*.³⁶ Jiménez states that:

No other group has a history of significant immigration that spans the periods of the great European migration, the post-1965 immigration, and the period in between, and Mexicans are certainly the only group whose presence in the United States stems from both colonization and immigration.³⁷

³⁵ Louis Silva, interviewed by George Walters, April 20, 2006 in Emporia, Kansas, interview transcript page 5. Kansas Historical Society: Kansas Memory, Interview on Experiences in World War II.

³⁶ Tomás R. Jiménez. *Replenished Ethnicity: Mexican Americans, Immigration, and Identity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

³⁷ Jiménez, 6.

Mexican Americans, as a group, not only have a varied history in their experiences as Americans but unlike many other immigrant groups had a constant flow of cultural replenishment as new Mexican immigrants continued to come into the United States. Jiménez's theory of ethnic replenishment is a reflection of continuous flow of Mexican migrants into the United States. Although many immigrant groups find it difficult to maintain their culture as their time in the United States increases, Mexican Americans have a consistent resource of culture from their ancestral land in the form of new immigrants-whether they want it or not. The steady flow of Mexicans coming into the United States also made it common for Anglos to group Mexican Americans with Mexican immigrants in their own minds. Jiménez argues that due to the fear of being "lumped" with Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans were very active in their attempts to create distance between the two groups.³⁸

Even if having Mexican national immigrants in their organization would not completely disable Anglo acceptance, LULAC feared that at the very least it would slow their progress drastically. Because of this, LULAC chose to not "openly defend" the civil rights of Mexican immigrants.³⁹ It was the same fear of estranging whites that led LULAC to choose not to defend African Americans.⁴⁰

As LULAC fought for Anglos to see Mexican Americans as similar and at the very least equal to themselves, they fought specifically for Anglos not to group them with people of color. In 1936, the United States Census Bureau told employers to classify Mexican-American employees as "colored."⁴¹ LULACers feared that "in a society that

³⁸ Jiménez, 243.

³⁹ Carroll, 125.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 124.

judged individuals on the basis of skin color,” if they were labeled as colored it would be even more difficult to be accepted into Anglo society.⁴² Mexican Americans feared that if they were classified as racially different rather than ethnically different that they would have little hope of integration and would be forced into a position where they were treated like colored people rather than Anglos—as they sought to be.⁴³

LULAC chose not to join their battle for civil rights with that of African Americans for political reasons, but even so individual Mexican Americans noted the connection between the two parallel movements. Having experienced racism throughout their lives, many Mexican Americans did not support discrimination against African Americans. Carlos Samarron, who was a member of the American G.I. Forum saw the connection between African American and Mexican-American civil rights battles and recognized that “as long as a black moves up, we’re going to move up too.”⁴⁴ Yet on the other side of the spectrum, some Mexican Americans did feel that they were superior to African Americans.⁴⁵ The LULAC organization as whole, regardless of their personal feelings towards people of color, feared the consequences of aligning themselves with African Americans to combat against racism. Mexican American LULAC members feared that uniting too closely with African Americans would cause Anglos to see them as even more different from themselves than they already did.⁴⁶

Carroll notes that Mexican-American LULAC members put more energy into fighting for a white classification than actually combatting the racism that led them to

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Carlos Samarron. Interviewed by Rene Zambrano in San Carlos, California on October 28, 2000, U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. All further information about Carlos Samarron is obtained from this interview unless otherwise stated.

⁴⁵ “A Class Apart” documentary, 2009. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PBS series.

⁴⁶ Carroll, 124.

feel the need to seek this categorization.⁴⁷ By 1940, the U.S. Census Bureau decided to classify Mexican Americans as white rather than colored. For LULAC this was a big step in the direction they wanted to go.

As LULAC and other Mexican-American civil rights groups fought to be mainstreamed into American society, they acknowledged the need for some special protections due to their differences from Anglos. Even though Mexican Americans had fought to be legally considered white, they were not treated as such and their official Caucasian status had little power in their everyday lives.

LULAC was gradually fighting legal battles to combat institutional segregation, as both bureaucratic and social racism remained strong. Mexican-Americans' legal Caucasian status provided them with no benefit when they continued to encounter so much disdain from Anglos. Segregation was widespread "enforced not by written laws, as was the case for African Americans but by rigid social code."⁴⁸ Although they could not force individuals to change their opinions about Latinos, they could take their issues to the courts and fight for change. Much of LULAC's leadership and membership were attorneys and had used their training and skillset to further their cause.

LULAC's members who were lawyers kept their eyes open for opportunities to challenge racism in the legal realm. Various LULAC members were lawyers who had been successful in fighting for Mexican American civil rights in the legal sphere. Gus Garcia had been successful in winning a court order fighting the segregation of Hispanic students in the Texas school system. Gus had been a great student at the University of Texas, Captain of their nationally ranked debate team, and very successful in law

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "A Class Apart" documentary, 2009. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PBS series.

school.⁴⁹ John J. Herrera was another experienced Mexican-American lawyer who had worked with Gus Garcia in *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District Carlos* and successfully argued that segregation of Mexican students in Texas was unconstitutional.⁵⁰ Cadena too had already experienced success in winning a ruling that ended restrictions barring Mexican Americans from buying houses in Anglo neighborhoods.⁵¹ Mexican Americans had used the courts to actively challenge discrimination since the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵² Although Mexican-American lawyers had been victorious in various legal battles regarding civil rights, Mexican Americans still faced many obstacles in their fight for equality.

In 1951, Pedro or “Pete” Hernandez a Mexican American cotton picker got into a verbal altercation with Joe Espinosa. Although the details were disputed by various witnesses and those involved, the basics of the story are that Joe had insulted Pete’s manhood due to a limp in Pete’s walk. Pete left the bar and, returning with a gun, he shot and killed Joe Espinosa. Pete was indicted for the murder in September of 1951. Gus Garcia was convinced that this was the case he and LULAC had been looking for.

The defense of Pete Hernandez was less about defending his innocence and more about the all Anglo jury. At the pre-trial hearing Gus Garcia argued that Hernandez was being denied a jury of his peers because even though 16 percent of Jackson County’s population was Mexican American, not even one Latino had been summoned for jury duty for 25 years in the county.⁵³

⁴⁹ “A Class Apart” documentary, 2009. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PBS series.

⁵⁰ Ignacio M. Garcia, *White But Not Equal: Mexican Americans, Jury Discrimination, and the Supreme Court* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009), 32.

⁵¹ “A Class Apart” documentary, 2009. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PBS series.

⁵² Garcia, 37.

⁵³ Michael A. Olivas, *“Colored Men” and “Hombres Aquí” Hernandez v. Texas and the Emergence of Mexican-American Lawyering* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2006), 2.

Prior to the trial, the petitioner, by his counsel, offered timely motions to quash the indictment and the jury panel. He alleged that persons of Mexican descent were systematically excluded from service as jury commissioners, grand jurors, and petit jurors, although there were such persons fully qualified to serve residing in Jackson County. The petitioner asserted that exclusion of his class deprived him, as a member of the class, of equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution.⁵⁴

It appeared that the tactic of raising a Mexican-American educated professional class had not led to acceptance by Anglos, at least not onto juries in Jackson County. Even as Latinos became more successful especially after World War II, not even doctors, lawyers, or professors who should have been “such persons fully qualified to serve” were given an opportunity to sit on juries in Jackson County. Having a “talented tenth” of Mexican Americans had not led Anglos to accept Mexican Americans as their equals. This educated and successful class of Mexican Americans had however established a class that was both attempting to and felt it was their responsibility to lead other and lower-class Mexican Americans in their battle for equality. For all Mexican Americans, regardless of class, having a jury completely made up of people who discriminated against them was equal to having the legal system against them.⁵⁵

In 1952, however, the Texas appellate court determined that Pete Hernandez had been tried fairly because Mexican Americans “are white people.”⁵⁶ The team of lawyers sought the protection of the 14th amendment, which in Section 1 declares that no state shall create or enforce laws that deny privileges entitled to citizens of the

⁵⁴ *Hernandez v. Texas* 347 U.S. 475 (1954) in Appendix IV in “*Colored Men*” and “*Hombres Aquí*” *Hernandez v. Texas and the Emergence of Mexican-American Lawyering* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2006), 247.

⁵⁵ García, 2.

⁵⁶ Olivas, 2.

United States and that no state shall deny any citizens the due process of the law.⁵⁷

The Texas courts argued that the fourteenth amendment protected blacks from whites and by law Mexican Americans were white.

As their battle reached toward the Texas Supreme Court and later the United States Supreme Court, the main players in the Hernandez legal team included Gustavo Garcia, Carlos Cadena, James DeAnda, and John J. Herrerea. Encounters with judges throughout the legal battle illuminated how common misconceptions about Mexican Americans were even among highly-educated Anglos in positions of power. When defending their case before the Texas Supreme Court the judge asked the lawyers if they needed an interpreter to which Garcia replied, “No, sir, Judge, if you can’t understand English or Spanish perhaps one of my colleagues can interpret for you.”⁵⁸

Ironically, while at the Texas courthouse arguing a case that stated because of extreme and widespread racism that Mexican Americans needed protection under the 14th amendment, when the lawyers went to find a men’s room they were told by a Mexican-American janitor in Spanish that they couldn’t use the main restroom. The men went downstairs and found a restroom labeled for “colored men” and “hombres aqui”.⁵⁹ Even though these men were educated men, lawyers even, they were not above or outside the realm of discrimination Mexican Americans faced on a daily basis in Texas. Their attempts at assimilation in to Anglo society and high level of education

⁵⁷ United States Constitution, 14th Amendment, Section 1. The entire section states: “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Available at <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=014/llsl014.db&recNum=389>.

⁵⁸ García, 34.

⁵⁹ Michael A. Olivas’ book on the case is titled after this event: “Colored Men” and “Hombres Aquí.”

had not changed the ways that they were treated and looked at by Anglos in their community. At the same time that the court was claiming that there is no institutional racism, the men fighting the case were experiencing social racism. After losing again at the state level, Hernandez's team of lawyers decided to take their case even further.

Taking the case to the United States Supreme Court was a risk. If they won, Mexican Americans would have protection under the 14th amendment but if they had not won Mexican Americans' argument for their ambiguous status could have led Anglos to question their identification of Mexican Americans within the United States even more than they already did.⁶⁰ Seeking protection under the 14th amendment could have caused Anglo Americans to question the Caucasian status awarded to Mexican Americans in 1940. In addition, appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court was expensive and those filing for appeal were responsible for paying a filing fee, for printing the briefs, and also for all of their travelling and lodging expenses.⁶¹ This would be a challenge for a group of people who in general lived in poverty.

Realizing the importance of the trial to their future, all different classes and divisions of the Mexican-American community in the United States pulled together in order to be able send Pete Hernandez and his legal team to Washington D.C. The case was publicized and LULAC asked for donations through its various chapters and individuals would even approach the lawyers and give them crumpled up dollar bills and coins.⁶² Mexican Americans gave as much as they could and some probably gave

⁶⁰ For a group that had so long sought to be seen as the same as Anglos, seeking to be classified as a protected group meant acknowledging that Mexican-Americans were different in some way. If they won, they would be defined as different with protection. If they lost, they would have exhausted a lot of energy trying to prove to Anglos that they were different but with no protections from the United States Constitution.

⁶¹ Norma Cantú in "A Class Apart" documentary, 2009. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PBS series.

⁶² Martha Trevis in "A Class Apart" documentary, 2009. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PBS series.

more than they could. Dr. Hector Garcia, founder of the American G.I. Forum, asked for donations through his radio program as well.⁶³ Through the donations of the national Mexican-American community, the case made it to the United States Supreme Court. Lower-class Mexican Americans who did not have the legal skills and knowledge to defend themselves helped financially contribute to send their “talented tenth” to defend them before the United States Supreme Court.

Carlos Cadena recalled the trial in a 1994 interview. At the beginning of the trial as Cadena stated that the petitioner was an American citizen of Mexican descent one of the judges asked, “What is that?” As Mr. Cadena explained, Justice Frankfurter interrupted asking, “They call them greasers down there don’t they?”⁶⁴ This short exchange demonstrates the ambiguous status of Mexican Americans in the United States. Although they wanted to be seen as white, what it meant to be Mexican American needed to be defined in order for them to seek protections from the United States government.

The legal team’s aims in seeking a specific classification for themselves as Mexican Americans instead of the ambiguous status they had long held can be understood through Critical Race Theory, which argues that to be able to combat racism, “we must first take account of race.”⁶⁵ Although Mexican Americans were legally considered Caucasian, that classification was used to their disadvantage when possible, for example as justification for all-white juries.⁶⁶ Mexican-American legal

⁶³ Dr. Hector Garcia and Gus Garcia were not related.

⁶⁴ Carlos Cadena interview in “A Class Apart” documentary, 2009. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE PBS series. Sections of this 1994 interview with Carlos Cadena were included in the documentary.

⁶⁵ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012). The quotation is on an unnumbered covered page and is quoting Justice Harry Blackmun.

⁶⁶ Jackson County attempted to justify not having a Hispanic jury member in 25 years by stating that because Mexican Americans were considered to be Caucasian they were represented when white jurors

leadership identified the need to be specifically defined, as they saw themselves as not white or black but as “a class apart.” As Delgado and Stefancic argue in regard to Critical Race Theory, they had to set a clear definition of their race before they could seek to change the treatment they received.

The Supreme Court announced their ruling in the case of *Hernandez vs. Texas* on May 3, 1954. The decision of the Texas Court was overturned and Hernandez was granted a new trial before a jury that included *his* peers. Hernandez was found guilty, but this time by a jury that included members with Hispanic surnames. The point of all of the appeals was never that Hernandez would be found not guilty but rather that he would have a trial with a jury representative of Jackson County’s population and “equal protection under the law.”⁶⁷ Hernandez was guilty beyond a doubt but in his case Gus Garcia and LULAC had seen the opportunity they had been looking for and seized it. Chief Justice Warren wrote, “It taxes our credulity to say that mere chance resulted in there being no members of this class (Mexican Americans) among over six thousand jurors called in the past twenty-five years [in Jackson County, Texas].”⁶⁸ Due to the ruling of the United States Supreme Court, Mexican Americans now had the protection of the 14th amendment. They had also specifically defined their status as unique group within the United States and would use that definition as a foundation to fight for further desegregation and equality.

The fact that LULAC lawyers used Hernandez’s crime as an opportunity to turn the case into a civil rights battle is telling of LULAC’s elitist tendencies. The LULAC

served. This justification demonstrates the need for Mexican Americans to specifically define themselves within United States culture.

⁶⁷ United States Constitution, 14th Amendment, Section 1.

⁶⁸ García, 1.

legal team never expected for Hernandez to not be found guilty but still they used his situation for their gain and Hernandez ultimately ended up in prison anyways. LULAC and its lawyers were focused on how they could use Hernandez and his circumstance to further their fight against segregation.⁶⁹

The fight for civil rights that the Pete Hernandez trial turned into is important because it was the first time Mexican Americans had taken their battle to the United States Supreme Court and it defined the status of Mexican Americans in the United States. Even more important is why it had been necessary for Mexican Americans to seek the protection of the 14th Amendment in the 1950s. As the “talented tenth” of Mexican Americans became even more educated and successful, at least in Texas, they still were largely rejected by Anglo society and working-class members of the Mexican-American community who had become less willing to accept inequality did not necessarily have the resources that would bring change.⁷⁰ However the tools that middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans had been able to acquire, especially through formal education, made them skilled albeit exclusive leaders among their people in fighting for civil rights.

As the civil rights organizations MAM and LULAC sought acceptance for Mexican Americans in the United States through the use of the English language, education, and assimilation, they realized that assimilation alone did not lead to Anglo acceptance into

⁶⁹ It is important to note that there was little doubt as to Pete Hernandez’s guilt. It is not as if the LULAC legal team was carelessly using an innocent man. However, it is important to at least mention the class difference and LULAC lawyers’ intentions behind defending Mr. Hernandez.

⁷⁰ As Mexican Americans became more educated, racism did not go away immediately. As stated earlier, even as attorneys in a Texas courthouse, Hernandez’s legal team was required to use separate bathrooms from Anglos. Segregation in schools did not go away on its own either, it had to be fought for. *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* was a case, in 1930, in which John J. Herrera and Gus Garcia had successfully argued that segregating Mexican students in Texas was unconstitutional. A similar case in California, in 1945, was *Mendez v. Westminster*, which two months later led to California being the first state to officially desegregate public school.

mainstream culture. What the Hernandez trial had confirmed to Mexican Americans was that the legal system was one of the most effective ways for them to fight for their rights because rather than fight for negotiation at the local level, they could “use facts rather than negotiation.”⁷¹ Now that Latinos had fought for and earned the protection of the 14th Amendment, they could now use that trial as precedent to build upon for future battles they would face.

The Hernandez trial was not the first time that Mexican Americans had used the legal system to fight for equality⁷² but it was the first time that their battle had gone to such a high court. The Hernandez trial built on other desegregation cases that had taken place in the years before World War II. The trajectory of Mexican-American civil rights action against official racism that was often fought in the legal realm demonstrates that Mexican-American activists were forging the path before World War II and continued to do so afterward with little influence from the war.

⁷¹ Ramos, 60.

⁷² Earlier cases include *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* in 1930 and *Mendez v. Westminster* in 1945, both were legal cases fighting segregating students of Mexican descent in schools.

CHAPTER 2

MEXICAN-AMERICAN VETERANS' PERCEPTIONS AMIDST THE MULTIPLE FACES OF INEQUALITY

At the same time that middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans were leading the fight in establishing methods of combatting official racism through legal action, Mexican Americans faced a whole other category of inequality in the face of social racism. Working-class Mexican Americans struggled to find a common ground between being treated as lesser on a regular basis and civil rights groups that encouraged them not to blame their problems on the racism they experienced, even when many of their struggles were a result of racism. The way in which Mexican-American World War II veterans remembered and discussed their lives and experiences before, during, and after their military service to the United States illuminates the profound instances of racism that these men encountered on a regular basis. Their recollections also demonstrate that these men acknowledged racism differently in varying spheres of their lives. Many of the interview subjects were very aware of discriminatory practices shared multiple stories of instances of racism and discrimination that they experienced. On the other hand, many veterans at first denied experiencing racism until they began to speak or thought longer on the topic. Others still told stories that to a 21st century outsider looking in seemed to clearly denote racism, yet the interviewee did not remember the instances they described as racially charged.

In analyzing various experiences of World War II veterans that a present-day outsider would perceive to be instances of racism, I seek to examine where these men

saw and acknowledged racism, where they did not, and why? While upper and middle class Mexican-American civil rights groups were combatting institutional discrimination even before the War, often Mexican Americans, regardless of class, were often unwilling to acknowledge issues of social racism. Mexican-American civil rights groups such as LULAC fought to not be placed in the same social category as African Americans fearing that being pooled together with a group that Anglos discriminated against and segregated to an even larger degree, would make their attempts at legal equality even more difficult to attain. Mexican Americans, through organizations such as LULAC, openly acknowledged and fought against the official racism they faced. Regardless of whether or not they had been willing to acknowledge it, this racism would have been apparent in public, legal, and political settings. On the other hand, for Mexican Americans to publically acknowledge that they were experiencing social racism would further alienate them from Anglos and push them further into a social category of which they did not want to be a part. For upper-class Mexican Americans, acknowledging social racism and official racism created two arenas of difference. For poorer working-class Mexican Americans it was even worse, they were separated by official racism, social racism, *and* poverty. Interview subjects' reticence to acknowledge inequality was common, however, in both official channels of their lives as well as social arenas.

The veterans' interviews used for this thesis were mainly, although not all, from men who started out in lower social classes and the majority of them did not initially acknowledge experiencing inequality in their lives. Just as upper-class Mexican Americans actively fought against official forms of racism in the courtroom, middle- and

working-class Mexican-American veterans tended to have an easier time speaking up about and/or acknowledging bureaucratic racism than they did social racism because there were concrete standards they could reference and dispute.

As upper-class Mexican Americans participating in civil rights groups combatted institutional discrimination, they encouraged Mexican Americans minimize their experiences of social racism. This mindset led many Mexican Americans, especially those of lower classes, who were seen as even more separate from white middle-class Anglo families, to not publicly acknowledge the social inequalities they faced. Even years later when interviewed about their life experiences, many Mexican-American veterans remained reluctant to acknowledge that the equalities they faced were due to their Mexican heritage.

Leon Festinger, in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, states that “two elements are dissonant if, for one reason or another, they do not fit together.” He continues that “culture or group standards may dictate that they do not fit.”⁷³ Festinger argues that dissonance is uncomfortable so individuals attempt to lessen dissonance but are not always able to do so. In cases where an individual cannot change the reality of the situation, they attempt to change the “cognitive element that is responsive” to the reality. The individual finds “some means of ignoring or counteracting the real situation.”⁷⁴ Festinger’s theory would support that the following anecdotes in which Mexican Americans experience inequality but do not attribute the situations to racism are an attempt to reduce dissonance. Different veterans’ stories demonstrate varied levels of dissonance and perceptions of inequality in different spheres of their lives

⁷³ Leon Festinger. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 12.

⁷⁴ Festinger, 21.

demonstrating which areas of their lives they were willing to acknowledge difference and which areas they weren't.

Although Mexican Americans regularly experienced racism, they did not always recount their experiences of inequality as being such. Mike Aguirre's life was an example of the larger pattern among Mexican Americans. When Ann Sidler interviewed Mike Aguirre in his home on March 24, 2000 about his life experiences as a Mexican-American World War II veteran, in response to one of the interviewer's questions, he initially stated that he did not face any difficulties or racial conflicts during the 1950s and 1960s. As he was telling her that he was aware that racial problems were an issue and he read about it in the newspapers he noted that he didn't experience problems himself. Immediately after this Aguirre said "take that back." He proceeded to discuss that after he was discharged from the Army there were many places in San Marcos that would not serve Mexican Americans.⁷⁵

Later in the interview Aguirre talked about his two children, his son who had a light complexion like his wife who was German and his daughter who had dark hair and a complexion similar to his own. Aguirre said his son never had any trouble growing up so long as he did not mention his last name. Mr. Aguirre recalls that when his son mentioned to anyone that his last name was Aguirre, often understood to be a Mexican name, then people would treat him differently. Aguirre felt that his daughter on the other hand, was constantly treated differently because of her visually apparent Mexican descent. He told his interviewer that she was treated poorly in the clubs she participated in throughout school, specifically the Girl Scouts, and Aguirre said because

⁷⁵ This would have been in 1945. Aguirre was discharged from the Army in 1945 and then joined the Merchant Marines in 1947.

she had darker skin and darker hair she “always had difficulties with people.”⁷⁶ It is curious that immediately after discussing his daughter’s struggle with discrimination, Aguirre went on to say “but we never had any trouble, being uh, segregated, or being, not equal.”⁷⁷ The inequality that Aguirre’s daughter faced apparently due to her heritage and appearance were instances of social racism. She was not forbidden by rules or law to participate in various clubs and organizations, rather she was allowed to participate but felt she was treated poorly due to rigid social beliefs that taught individuals to look down on people of Mexican descent as different and lesser-than Anglos.

The disconnect between Aguirre’s initial statement and his descriptions call attention to the fact that Aguirre was not initially willing to acknowledge his experiences of being a victim of racism to his interviewer. Aguirre even denied struggling with inequality immediately after discussing the unequal treatment experienced by his children either in the case of his son, due to his last name, or in the case of his daughter due to her Mexican features. What makes his denial of his family being victims of unequal treatment even more perplexing is that he continues on to say that because of his daughter’s experiences with racism in Texas growing up and “especially in high school” she refused to live in Texas as an adult.⁷⁸ As Aguirre continued to tell his story, he unveiled a life that was laden with racism and discrimination. As he described his life he made statements that clearly acknowledged that Aguirre was aware of the racism and discrimination in his life and he even took action against inequality in his place of

⁷⁶ Mike Aguirre, interviewed by Anne Sidler, interview transcript, page 19, San Marcos Texas, 24 March 2000, U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. All further mention of Mike Aguirre is obtained from this interview unless otherwise noted.

⁷⁷ Mike Aguirre, interview transcript page 19.

⁷⁸ Ibid, page 19.

employment. It is notable, then, that Aguirre was not willing to acknowledge pervasive systems of inequality as crucial to his own experience as a Mexican American.

In the face of racism in his workplace, Aguirre sought change through contacting people in positions of power while carefully watching his reactions to racist treatment in the hopes of being a good representative of Mexican Americans. After six years in the army during World War II and retiring from his twenty-one year service in the merchant marines, Aguirre applied to work at the post office in San Marcos. He had passed the necessary tests and applied to the postmaster for work. A few months later he noticed a few new Anglo carriers and came to find that they did not have the necessary qualifications for the job. He went to Senator Yarborough's office and since he was not there he spoke with the staff and told them "Listen, I think I've been uh, discriminated against for a job."⁷⁹ They took his case and within a week, Aguirre received a letter from the post office to come in for a job interview. Aguirre was hired. In his interview years later, he expressed his pride in both being the first minority person to work at the local post office and handling the racist treatment of his coworkers and bosses to remain in his position for many years. Just as MAM had encouraged Mexican Americans to do, Aguirre had not acted rashly in the face of adversity, instead he had challenged the discrimination through the channels set in place to do so while at the same time remaining hopeful in his fight for change.

Throughout his many years of work at the post office, Aguirre dealt with the hateful treatment of his coworkers many of whom he felt were intentionally trying to cause him to lose his temper. Aguirre's coworkers were openly racist around him and

⁷⁹ Mike Aguirre, interview.

regularly used racial slurs.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, Aguirre made it his goal to never react to their racism because he felt that if he lost his temper, he would lose his job and be used as an example as to not hire minorities in the future. In addition to being conscious of the racism, Aguirre was also thoughtful and intentional in the ways he reacted with a sense of the larger implications of his actions. Aguirre even filed a handful of EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) cases against the postmaster that were found in his favor and he was given back pay and sick leave owed to him. Not only had Aguirre noticed the racism at his job, he took action against this treatment. Aguirre had been willing to acknowledge and fight against racism in situations when the discrimination had both a profound impact on his life and when he saw a channel through which he could seek a change to that treatment (such as through the appropriate complaint avenues at work and EEO rules). In discussion however, initially he was still hesitant to make the acknowledgement.

Acknowledging a case of segregation, Aguirre started by saying “I’m getting down and dirty now [laughs]” almost as if he felt as though he was not supposed to share the information in the story he tells.⁸¹ At the post office, mail was separated into boxes for people that had a route and people that had boxes at the post office. The third division was for people who had to pick up their own mail, either because they lived far out in the country or because they could not afford a box. They had three separate boxes and this mail was separated into three different categories. Aguirre said that it was supposed to be divided by race and “they had one for the white, they’d call em. One for the Mexicans and one for the black and the mail was just separated like

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Mike Aguirre, interview.

that.”⁸² Aguirre brought a grievance against this practice and the next day, when he came to work and checked there was only one shelf of mail. Again, Aguirre proactively fought inequality, he stated, “So, that’s how bad it was here” demonstrating how aware he truly was of the discrimination that was taking place in his own life.⁸³

Aguirre’s actions in response to the segregation he experienced while working for the United States Post Office were exactly the type of reaction MAM encouraged. As Sánchez points out, MAM wanted all Mexican Americans to believe that they could stand up against racism but to also have a positive attitude even when encountering inequality.⁸⁴ Rather than protest or quit his job, Aguirre dealt with issue of racism in his workplace within the confines of the system by filing a grievance. Yet even years later when he felt that this story was noteworthy enough to tell his interviewer, he did not dwell on the negativity of the experience. When asked about when he began to see change, Aguirre told his interviewer, “Very slowly. Very slowly.”⁸⁵ The equality that Mexican Americans fought for in the years following their service in World War II came slowly. The period between Mike Aguirre’s military service in World War II and his employment at the post office was at least twenty-three years.⁸⁶

Inequality persisted in Mike Aguirre’s life not only personally and at work but also in what housing developments would allow him to purchase a home. Although housing areas were not officially segregated, Aguirre claimed that whites did what they could to socially enforce their racism by making it as difficult as possible for Mexican Americans

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Sánchez, 259-260.

⁸⁵ Mike Aguirre, interview.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Mike Aguirre was discharged from the military in 1945. Aguirre joined the Merchant Marines in 1947 and had a 21-year career in their service. It was after he retired from the Merchant Marines that he applied for a job at the United States Post Office. This means that he would have begun working at the Post Office in 1968 or later.

to buy homes in predominately white neighborhoods. When Aguirre wanted to buy his home, he said that the man would not sell it to him because he was a minority. However, something happened to the man that created a financial burden and he urgently needed the money and Aguirre bought the house from him. He was forced to pay for the house in cash because, according to Aguirre, Mexican Americans were rarely sold homes on terms. For many years that followed, there were no other minorities in the neighborhood. Aguirre remembers that in order to prevent minorities from buying, people would not sell on terms; sellers required cash and hoped that this would eliminate minorities from the buying market. Anglos forcing Mexican-American homebuyers to pay in cash would have been extremely limiting in the postwar period when new opportunities to become homeowners should have more readily available with access to FHA loans and the GI Bill, which intended to help veterans attain home loans.

Mike Aguirre's life story demonstrates that Mexican Americans either perhaps at times did not register or at least acknowledge certain instances of racism as being such. Mike Aguirre was not a man who experienced and ignored racism but a man who took tangible action against inequality at various times in his life. If an activist-minded Mexican American like Mr. Aguirre initially responded that he and his family "never had any trouble, being uh, segregated, or being, not equal," other Mexican Americans especially those less active in demanding change may have been more likely and willing to ignore the various aspects of racism they dealt with in their lives.⁸⁷ Through the stories Aguirre shared with his interviewer and the way he told them, it was clear that Mr. Aguirre both experienced inequality and was aware that those experiences

⁸⁷ Mike Aguirre, interview.

were attributable to racism the initial denial was demonstrative of his discomfort and reticence to verbally acknowledge that racism.

In Mike Aguirre's case, although he initially stated that he did not experience inequality, as he spoke on the issue more it became clear that Aguirre was aware that he had experienced discrimination in the workplace. The inequality that Aguirre did *not* acknowledge was on the personal level. Discrimination in the hiring processes and labor division at the United States Post Office was something that Aguirre could and did take formal action against. Civil rights acts that had been fought for and developed in the 1960s made it possible for Aguirre to take the actions that he did. On the other hand, there were few opportunities through official channels to address and fight the unequal treatment that his family faced in *social* settings. To Aguirre it was bureaucratic rather than social racism that had a pertinent impact on his perceptions of his life and that actually had channels through which it could be addressed. Rather than present himself as a passive victim of his circumstances, Aguirre positioned himself as an active fighter. Throughout the interview, Mr. Aguirre monitored the way he spoke and presented his experiences; molded by his influences he tailored the representations of his experiences to his interviewer.

Aguirre saw himself not as a victim of racism but rather as an active fighter. This is especially evident when Mr. Aguirre stated that "if it hadn't been for, uh, our religion, my religion, I would never pull through" the treatment he experienced.⁸⁸ He goes on to say that he forgave them for "what they were doing" and tried to "live along that."⁸⁹ In this statement Aguirre was acknowledging what he did not at the beginning of the

⁸⁸ Mike Aguirre, interview transcript page 22.

⁸⁹ Ibid, page 22.

interview—that people did not treat him equally but he is also presenting to the interviewer that he chose to rise above that treatment. Among Mexican Americans who lived through this period, Aguirre is not alone in his representation of the treatment he received. Other Mexican-American World War II Veterans interviewed on multiple instances either did not recognize or did not acknowledge experiences of racism and inequality—especially social inequality.

The ideologies of the Mexican American Movement (MAM) organization help explain the prevalent mindset among Mexican Americans dealing with discrimination from the 1930s to the 1950s. MAM sprung up from the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in southern California and consisted of primarily second-generation Mexican Americans.⁹⁰ MAM strongly encouraged education among Mexican Americans, believing that education was the only manner through which Mexican Americans could succeed within the United States.⁹¹ MAM and their publications also encouraged positive and hopeful attitudes in confronting racism.

It was the encouragement of organizations like MAM to Mexican Americans to stay hopeful while they sought to “overcome the personal effects of discrimination while participating in its social eradication,” that urged Mexican Americans to mentally downplay some of the experiences in which they blatantly faced racism.⁹² It was as if MAM was petitioning Mexican Americans to work on eliminating the problem of inequality but not to complain about it in the meantime. The *Mexican Voice*, a publication of MAM, published an article encouraging Mexican Americans to stay

⁹⁰ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 255.

⁹¹ Sánchez, 257.

⁹² Sánchez, 260.

positive so that “we wouldn’t attribute our shortcomings and defeats to segregation and prejudice.”⁹³ As Mexican American veterans forged ahead seeking equality, MAM encouraged its members to look at their current circumstances and future with optimism in regard to racism. The conflicting realization of experiencing inequality on a regular basis and MAM’s ideology that one should not blame (attribute) their negative treatment on racism created dissonance in the minds of Mexican Americans.

Evidence from oral histories supports Sanchez’s argument that it was ideas similar to those circulated by MAM encouraging Mexican Americans to be hopeful in the midst of racism that led Mexican Americans to focus on positive aspects of their lives and to downplay experiences of unequal treatment. The idea of remaining hopeful and positive in the midst of racism was so pervasive that these mindsets became ingrained and remain even today when Mexican Americans recount experiences from years past.

Just as had been the case for Mike Aguirre, Rudy Acosta did not perceive or at least did not acknowledge, racism in various areas of his life that to a present day outsider would seem to be such. Rudy Acosta had served his country, the United States, in World War II in hopes of a better future and like many other Mexican Americans, he was accustomed to dealing with racism from an early age.⁹⁴ He was the only student in his class who the teacher would allow to go to the bathroom alone. At first, he thought that this was because his teacher liked him, but one day another student told Rudy that every time he left the classroom, the teacher would talk bad about him behind his back to the other students. In the fifth grade, there was a girl in

⁹³ Sanchez, 260.

⁹⁴ Rudolfo (Rudy) Acosta, interviewed by Louis Sahagun, videotape recording, 2000 Los Angeles, California, U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project. All further mention of Rudolfo or Rudy Acosta is obtained from this interview unless otherwise noted.

Rudy's class who would copy his assignments, the teacher would always fail Acosta and pass the girl, even though they had the same answers.⁹⁵ Despite the adversity Acosta dealt with in school, he became the only member of his family up until that point to graduate from high school.

Mr. Acosta served in the Air Corps and although he had disclosed multiple instances of racism in his childhood and during his time in the military, claimed that he did not experience real racism until after his war service. At one point during Acosta's military service, a pilot was supposed to submit both Acosta and a peer to be given another stripe, although Acosta qualified for the stripe his pilot only submitted the other man. When Acosta realized the deception, the pilot was in the hospital so he went past him to another superior who put him in for his next stripe, which Acosta received right before he was shipped home. Acosta was never informed as to why he was not initially submitted to receive his next stripe. According to Acosta's account the other man and himself were equally qualified, race seems to be the only differing factor between the two men. Acosta, however, claimed that he did not believe that the situation was attributable to racism. Still, the event had meaning to him, because he pointed it out to his interviewer.

Once stateside but still in the military, Acosta experienced multiple instances of racism, even when it was evident to those around him that he was a soldier fighting for the same causes and country as those discriminating against him. Acosta was dating a girl from Galveston, Texas who stood him up once she found out that he was Mexican, up until then no one had ever asked his race. During this part of the interview, Acosta's

⁹⁵ Rudy Acosta, interview. Mr. Acosta does not distinguish whether or not this was the same teacher he mentions earlier in the interview that had treated him poorly.

voice hollowed to a tone of sadness and it was evident that this experience affected and hurt him deeply. This is not the only discrimination Acosta experienced with the opposite sex. Once while Acosta was at a club, he approached a table of three girls and asked one to dance with him, after being denied by all three he walked away only to see one of them accept a white man's offer to dance. Acosta believed the three women shot down his offer to dance because he was a Mexican man. Clearly being denied romantically because of race was something especially memorable to Acosta. Instances like this show that Mexican Americans not only dealt with racism on a bureaucratic level but on a social level as well. As Mexican Americans fought for equal civil rights and laws began to change, social issues could not be addressed through the same methods. A dance club may be forced by changing laws to allow a Mexican American entrance, there is nothing short of changing her own internal perceptions that can be done to force a white woman to dance with a Mexican-American man.

Rudy Acosta continued to experience discrimination throughout his stateside military service. While attending the theatre, Acosta was told he had to move and sit on the Mexican side. He held his ground and said that he would not move unless the military police came and threw him out and invited the theater attendant to guess who's side the MP would be on. He stayed and sat there in the white section. At first look, Acosta's challenge to the theater attendant to call the MP was probably because he knew they would not do so. In looking at it further, his unwillingness to move unless told to do so by a military policeman, demonstrated a challenge to the theater attendant to identify Acosta as an American soldier, rather than a Mexican. By telling the theater attendant to call the military police, Mr. Acosta was not saying 'you can't kick me out

because Mexicans and Anglos are equal,' rather he was saying 'you can't kick me out because American soldiers and American soldiers are equal.' He was identifying as an American soldier rather than a Mexican American, and how could a theater attendant justify removing an American soldier from a theatre during wartime?

Acosta and a few other Mexican-American soldiers attended an upper middle-class church in their uniforms and when they walked in every one stared at them. After the service, the priest would not extend his hand to Acosta, so Rudy intentionally grabbed the priest's hand and complemented the sermon. The priest tried to let go of Acosta's hand as quickly as he could. Although it may seem minimal, Rudy confronted the priest's racism even if only to the small extent that he could by intentionally speaking to the priest and holding onto his hand, something which the priest would not have given a second thought if done by an Anglo parishioner. The manner in which Mexican Americans could confront social racism was much less black and white than the formal channels through which Latinos confronted official racism so any opportunity in which they could stand up for themselves was of importance.

After leaving the church, Acosta and the other soldiers with him went to a restaurant where both the waitress and owner blatantly ignored them to their faces when they asked for service. Due to the regularity of discrimination where they were stationed in Lubbock, Texas, Rudy and a few other men asked their officer for a transfer. The paperwork would have taken a longer time than the remaining amount of time that they were meant to be in Lubbock so that group of men requesting transfers just stayed in town until their release.

Later when Acosta walked by the restaurant that had refused him service there was a sign on the window stating that the restaurant was off limits to all military personnel. Major K.K. Turner had put the sign up in support of the minority troops the restaurant had refused to serve. Rudy walked by and said, "That's what you get," they lost a lot of service.⁹⁶ This was an example of the military taking action on behalf of Mexican-American soldiers to demand better treatment. For Rudy, this was a rare experience of an Anglo stepping in to defend him and maybe even his first experience of being treated equally to Anglos. Experiencing this type of comradery and support from his peers during his service in World War II made it difficult to return to a civilian life after the War where racist treatment had not improved from pre-war conditions.⁹⁷ Situations such as this where Mexican-American soldiers were able to see that speaking up led to improvements rather than falling on deaf ears, encouraged them to continue to solicit change when they returned home in the postwar years.

Acosta's claim that he did not experience real discrimination until after his military service was followed by multiple descriptions of racism in his youth, school years, and *during* his military career. Acosta's initial lack of acknowledgment toward the racism he experienced in school and the little importance he seems to place on it demonstrates that, to him, school was not a politicized sphere and so not noteworthy of acknowledging the racism that took place in that realm. Although middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans highly valued education, this was not a luxury available to poor working-class Mexican Americans. For those who did not struggle to afford a

⁹⁶ Rudolfo Acosta, interview.

⁹⁷ Military experiences varied from soldier to soldier. While some Mexican-American soldiers built relationships with Anglo soldiers and had positive and encouraging experiences, others encountered extreme racism and hatred within the military. Others, had a mix of both due to the high number of people with whom they came in contact during their service time.

home or food, to send their children to school was very important so that their children could strive to attain an even better life than they had. On the other hand, for lower-income families, keeping a roof over their heads and putting food on the table was a priority—which in many circumstances meant that children needed to drop out of school at a young age to work.

In regard to his military service, perhaps up until the point that Acosta felt he had validated his American identity by serving as a soldier defending the United States, he felt that he was undeserving or had no right to demand the same treatment as his Anglo American peers. One Mexican-American veteran, Jesse Ybarra, specifically noted feeling “more of an American than [he] was before.”⁹⁸ If Rudy Acosta did not identify as or feel entirely American before the War, it is possible that he felt he did not have the right to demand the equality from which other Americans benefited. The interview subjects’ anecdotes and the way they tell them demonstrate, rather, it was not that they did not feel that they had no right to demand equality before the War but rather they realized they did not have much power or support if they did attempt to demand better from their peers. Situations such as the positive affirmation that came from the support of Acosta’s military leadership in making the restaurant off-limits after it denied service to Mexican-American soldiers contributed to internal transformations amongst Mexican-American soldiers. Instances of support from Anglos gave hope to soldiers of Mexican descent.

Either way, their service to their country was a source of pride for these Veterans who had demonstrated their loyalty to the United States. In a journal article in

⁹⁸ Steven Rosales, “Fighting the Peace at Home: Mexican American Veterans and the 1944 GI Bill of Rights,” *Pacific Historical Review* (November 2011): 620.

Hispanic commemorating the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Melanie Cole analyzes the pride that Mexican Americans felt in their military contributions, which they felt had earned them the right to equality:

The veterans' voices fill with pride and emotion; for each of them, military service represented their full participation as citizens. For those who served—and survived—the war presented an opportunity. Latino soldiers, the majority of them Mexican American, learned that they were as capable as other soldiers, a valuable boost to the self-confidence of people who had been living under segregation. They learned the world could be different.⁹⁹

Not only did the War demonstrate to Mexican-American veterans that the treatment they dealt with on a daily basis could be improved, their service and sacrifice made them feel that it *should* be different and that they deserved for it to be.

The service of Mexican-American soldiers did not only serve as an opportunity for their futures but in addition throughout the majority of interviews examined for this chapter, veterans denied that they experienced discrimination within the military sphere or stated that racism was minimal, even when that did not appear to be the case.¹⁰⁰ As earlier veterans' stories have demonstrated, sometimes there *is* racism but it is either invisible to the victim or they are unwilling to acknowledge that it is present. While some veterans' interviews demonstrated experiences of racism that they did not perceive as such, it is likely that their experiences varied largely from soldier to soldier. While there were many Mexican-American soldiers who stated they were victims of racism while in the service, there were also large numbers who felt that their time in the service during World War II was free of racism. Equally important as the persistence of racism

⁹⁹ Melanie Cole, "G.I. Jose: What World War II means to Hispanics who served," *Hispanic* (November 1995): 20.

¹⁰⁰ Though this is not the case in every interview the claim of little to no discrimination in the military is the overwhelming trend representing in my source base. However, the common claim that one did not experience racism was often followed by the telling of one or more stories in which the interview subject was in fact discriminated against.

towards Mexican Americans during their time in the service, was their perception of whether or not they felt they had been victims of inequality. It was what they perceived that influenced their actions.

Just like in their civilian lives, many veterans did not identify as having experienced racism in their time in the military. When Sylvester Rodriguez was asked about how he was treated in the military, he stated, "I was treated the same as everybody else."¹⁰¹ Rodriguez also mentioned that he was the only Mexican American at Basic Training. During their training, the men were not allowed to go out after dark, they were not even allowed to leave their barracks. One evening once they had gone to bed, three sergeants, non-commissioned officers, after an evening of drinking, came into Rodriguez's room of five men. The NCOs turned on the lights in the barracks and everyone woke up except for one man. The NCOs went over his bed and flipped it over to wake him up, his watch fell on the ground and the NCO stomped the watch and broke it. Rodriguez said that the sergeants continued to yell at the men for no particular reason, "Hey, what are you guys doing here, wake up"¹⁰² and so on. Eventually, the NCOs left the room, with the light on. Rodriguez got up and turned off the light. The sergeants returned and asked who had turned off the light. When Rodriguez said he had turned it off, a sergeant came up in front of him and hit him in the face breaking his front tooth and knocking him onto the back of the bed.

The next morning, Rodriguez reported the incident to his captain and the captain told him, "No, there's nobody here that hits a man" but permitted him to go and see the

¹⁰¹ Sylvester Rodriguez, interviewed by Pennington, interview transcript, March 17, 2006, Emporia, Kansas, Kansas Memory: Kansas Historical Society. All other information about Sylvester Rodriguez is obtained from this interview unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰² Sylvester Rodriguez, interview.

dentist.¹⁰³ The dentist was more sympathetic about the violence committed against Rodriguez and said, “Yeah, they shouldn’t be doing this at all.”¹⁰⁴ Because of his visit to the dentist, Rodriguez was late to his class. When the lieutenant in charge of the class asked why Rodriguez was late, he told him about being hit in the face and his tooth being broken. The lieutenant following a similar note as his captain said, “They don’t hit the men here... you probably were walking around in the dark and hit a tree.”¹⁰⁵ The interviewer asked Mr. Rodriguez, “You weren’t supposed to say what happened?” and he replied, “Yes, so that was as far as it went.”¹⁰⁶ Rodriguez said in his interview that he did not think he was hit in the face because he was Mexican American but did not offer up an alternative motive for the NCO who hit him or for the way his chain of command reacted, or in this case did not react, to the violence.

The cadre who came into Rodriguez’s barracks that night were messing with all of the men, they even flipped another man’s bunk over and broke his watch but Rodriguez was the only man against whom they took *violent* action. The more demonstrative aspect to Mr. Rodriguez’s story is that no one in his unit’s military leadership would acknowledge or do anything about violence and inappropriate activity amongst servicemen. The lack of action in regard to incidents of inappropriate behavior would lead one to believe that other Mexican-American servicemen experienced more racism than they acknowledged but felt it futile to attempt to take any action against it. Continually being told that something is *not* what it truly is (just as Rodriguez was) could influence soldiers to believe that or at least to see that speaking up about it could lead

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

to trouble rather than a solution. The dissonance between knowing what had happened to them was wrong and being told by their superiors either that what had happened had not actually happened (as in the case of the superior who told Rodriguez he ran into a tree rather than been hit) and that their issues would not be addressed, led these soldiers to find a way to (although falsely) reduce the dissonance by attempting to rationalize to themselves that the attack and lack of discipline was not a matter of race. Or at least, Mexican-American soldiers were conditioned through similar situations how they felt they needed to censor themselves to unsympathetic Anglos.

Additionally, despite the fact that Mexican Americans served in large numbers in the United States military, they were often the only one of Mexican descent within their own respective units, just as Louis Tellez was in his platoon. This meant that they often had little support and no other Mexican-American peers dealing with similar struggles to turn to. When Tellez recounted the racism he experienced in the service and being the only Hispanic in his platoon he said, “It really hurt me” but “you can’t do anything about it because you’re all alone.”¹⁰⁷

Dr. Hector Garcia, who later went on to start the American G.I. Forum, had many of his own experiences facing racism throughout his life and military career. When Dr. Garcia was older and looking back over his years fighting for Mexican American civil rights, his recollection of the Felix Longoria incident sheds light on why he thought that Mexican Americans seemed to be unaware of certain aspects of racism they experienced. Felix Longoria was a Mexican-American man who died serving in World

¹⁰⁷ Cole. “G.I Jose: What World War II means to Hispanics who served,” 22. Due to the large number of Mexican Americans who served in World War II, it is surprising that so many Mexican American soldiers were the only person of Hispanic descent in their units and did not recall seeing many other Latinos in other units or at basic training.

War II. When he was returned to the United States, the local funeral home in his hometown of Three Rivers, Texas refused to hold his wake in their chapel because of his Mexican descent. Tom Kennedy, the owner of the Manon Rice Funeral Home told Felix's widow Beatrice that the reason was that "the whites would not like it."¹⁰⁸ Dr. Garcia analyzed why before the Longoria incident, he felt that racism was often not perceived in Longoria's hometown.

Dr. Garcia posits that it is likely that Mexican Americans did not know that they were being discriminated against because they did not know what their rights were. Evidence provided in my subjects' interviews demonstrates that it is more likely that they knew they were being discriminated against they just didn't know what to do, or felt powerless to do anything and also felt afraid. They were also being encouraged to passively take the treatment to which they had become accustomed by organizations like MAM. Garcia also argues that it is possible that not only did Mexican Americans not realize that they were victims of racism but also that their "oppressors"[Anglos] were unaware that it was not right to victimize Mexican Americans. Garcia contends that both Anglos and Mexican Americans had become accustomed to the tradition of oppression and inequality: "The great majority of the Anglos did not know that they were violating our rights, and the majority of our people did not know they were being violated because they did not know what their rights were."¹⁰⁹ In all reality, Anglos knew they were treating Mexican Americans with contempt and Mexican Americans knew that they were facing injustices. The absence of action and reaction before the Longoria incident was due to the lack of channels through which change could be sought and no firmly

¹⁰⁸ Patrick J. Carroll, *Felix Longoria's Wake: Bereavement, Racism, and the Rise of Mexican American Activism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 56.

¹⁰⁹ Carroll, 129-130.

defined legal rights. To tie in with Dr. Garcia's analysis, *yes* Mexican Americans did know that they were experiencing unequal treatment but *no* they did not always know what their legal rights were.

Dr. Garcia's assessment of the small town of Three Rivers, Texas is representative of the larger pattern of Mexican Americans who faced discrimination. It took a pivotal event for working-class Latinos accustomed to inequality to have an opportunity to challenge the treatment they had long experienced as unjust and courage to stand up against it.

Analyzing the stories of Mexican-American veterans in their own words demonstrates their own perceptions of their experiences in the face of inequality. They often took action against inequality when there was a venue through which they could do so, but more often than not, there wasn't. For Mexican-Americans of lower social-classes, there were little opportunities to speak up in a way that would actually affect change. World War II and their new veteran status gave them that venue.

Latinos recalling their experiences throughout their lives, as a general rule, did not acknowledge a large amount of the inequality they experienced or attribute their poor treatment to racism; or they at least were not willing to do so initially in their interviews. This indicates two things. One is that different individuals placed emphasis on different areas of their lives and inequality in some specific realms had more of a personal impact than did inequality in other area. The second is that Mexican Americans were exposed to literature from Mexican-American civil rights groups encouraging them to not blame their difficulties on racism and they struggled to lessen the dissonance and rationalize that ideology with the fact that a large amount of their

problems were truly due to the racism they experienced. The subjects' stories and the way they told them, combined with the ideologies of civil rights groups at the time demonstrate why Mexican Americans did not always acknowledge instances that would appear to be racism as such in their presentations of the situations.

CHAPTER 3

EDUCATION AND THE INFANTRY CONNECTION

Mexican-American civil rights groups encouraged Latinos to seek and further their education as the best method to better their social standing and lessen discrimination. Unfortunately, if education was what they thought of as their “only weapon,” the majority of Mexican Americans were not able to fully use this tool in the 1930s because they could not for economic and discriminatory reasons.¹¹⁰ Experiences of Hispanic students in the educational sphere varied greatly depending on factors such as social-class and whether or not their school was physically segregated. For students who learned in segregated school systems, buildings, or sections of the school—the racism they experienced was official racism. There were policies, rules, or laws that created the segregated system. More commonly, students were in integrated classrooms but experienced social racism in regard to the treatment they received from teachers and peers. The unequal access to education had an effect later in life for Mexican Americans who entered the military.

¹¹⁰ For students who had to leave school at a young age in order to help support their families, it was the implicit factors of racism and also poverty that affected their lives. Through his hierarchy of needs, Maslow argues that if an individual’s lower-level needs are not being met, that individual is unlikely to progress on to reaching and attaining higher level needs. Maslow defines the most basic level of needs as “biological and physiological needs” such as “air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep.” There are five levels in total: biological and physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. Lower- and working-class Mexican Americans who were unable to meet even their basic needs of having enough food and a stable place to live, were not afforded the luxury of preoccupation over their children earning a high school diploma or learning in integrated schools where they received equal treatment. Middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans, who had little difficulty providing for their families and did not need their children to work to help support their family, were able to emphasize and encourage education so that their children might reach even higher levels of success than themselves. But this was dependent on their lower-level needs being fulfilled. From S.A. McLeod. “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”. 2007. <http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>. Accessed 5 April 2015.

Drop-out rates among Mexican American students were high, “53.7 percent of Mexican girls and 43.7 percent of Mexican boys dropped out of school between the ages of fourteen and sixteen.”¹¹¹ The majority of students noted financial issues as their reason for leaving school, about 13 percent claimed that they left school because they were not encouraged to stay, and others provided the reason for their leaving as racism in the school sphere.¹¹²

Rudy Acosta’s story illustrates the pressure young Mexican-American students faced to drop out of school and work to help supplement their families’ low incomes. Acosta recalled that in his youth, his mother wanted him to drop out of school in the tenth grade to get a job. He convinced his mother to let him stay in school and he became the first person in his family to graduate from High School.¹¹³ Other young Mexican Americans represented by the before-mentioned statistic were not so lucky and had no other choice than to drop out of school in order to help support their families. Those who did remain in school were often forced to modify their Mexican identities in varying degrees in order to make it through the Anglo school system.

Enrique Cervantes, who was not allowed to use his Mexican first name and was initially called Henry by his first grade school teacher, used the name Henry or Hank throughout his life. Mr. Cervantes remembers that “very early on, when I was in the 1st grade, my teacher very quickly taught me that ‘we don’t speak Spanish here. And your

¹¹¹ George J. Sanchez. *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 257. This statistic cited from George J. Sánchez’s *Becoming Mexican American* is from an early 1930s study.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Rudolfo (Rudy) Acosta, interviewed by Louis Sahagun, videotape recording, 2000 Los Angeles, California, U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project. All further mention of Rudolfo or Rudy Acosta is obtained from this interview unless otherwise noted.

name is not Enrique, it's Henry."¹¹⁴ Mr. Cervantes' experiences were not out of the ordinary as it was not uncommon for students with Mexican names to be given Anglo names by their schoolteachers nor was it rare for Spanish-speaking students to be forbidden from speaking Spanish in school.

Another man who faced racial issues as a student was Carlos Samarron. As a grown man, Mr. Samarron was active in fighting for Mexican-American civil rights but in his youth Samarron had to navigate the Anglo school system as did many other Mexican American youth. Although Carlos was allowed to speak Spanish in school, he found that the Anglos would get upset and offended because they did not understand what the Spanish-speakers were talking about so he spoke English while he was at school positing "why antagonize them?"¹¹⁵ Samarron modified the demonstration of his culture through language in order to attempt to lessen tension amongst himself and his Anglo classmates.

In Cervantes's experience, his teacher made her expectations and discrimination very clear and he knew that in order to be as successful as possible in school, he would have to operate within the restrictions that his teacher had imposed. Carlos Samarron's experience was different. Samarron was not forbidden from speaking Spanish in school but chose not to, so as not to "antagonize" Anglo peers and teachers. Samarron's decision to avoid speaking Spanish in school demonstrates a conscientious awareness to avoid conflict, not having been forced to behave a certain way.

¹¹⁴ Enrique "Henry/Hank" Cervantes. Interviewed by Bruce Ashcroft and Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez in Washington, D.C. on May 30, 2004, U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. All other further mention of Enrique "Henry/Hank" Cervantes is obtained from this interview unless otherwise noted.

¹¹⁵ Enrique "Henry/Hank" Cervantes, interview.

Latinos' early educational foundations had an impact on their opportunities in the military later in life. As Mexican Americans sought to demonstrate American support through military service in World War II, their educational foundation inhibited them. For the many Mexican Americans who were unable to remain in school beyond young ages, their lower education levels in general had an effect on their military placements and careers.

When Rudy Acosta recalled his World War II service, he remembered being afraid to end up in the infantry and was very happy when he was not called to be in the infantry.¹¹⁶ After four days of testing, Rudy was placed in the Signal Corps, which was attached to the Army Air Corps. Rudy said that after testing he was told that those with the highest IQs were placed in the Army Air Corps, the next level down were placed in administrative positions or as quartermasters and those with the lowest level of test scores were placed in the infantry.¹¹⁷

Joe Jaime was another soldier who felt that it was common for Latinos to be placed in infantry units. While Joe himself was a Tech Sergeant in the Army at least two of his brothers, like many other Hispanics, were placed in the infantry. Joe received a letter from his brother Anthony Jaime who was in the 164th Infantry on September 24, 1943 about their younger brother Carlos or "Charlie" who was about to turn eighteen. Anthony "Tony" was worried about Charlie being placed in the infantry and Tony wrote to Joe about Charlie, "If he comes in he'll probably get fucked too."¹¹⁸ Less than three months later Joe received a letter from his brother Charlie that was written on

¹¹⁶ Rudy Acosta, interview.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Anthony Jaime, letter to Joe Jaime. Written September 21, 1943. Available in Joe Jaime's folder at the University of Texas at Austin's Nettie Lee Benson Collection as part of the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project.

December 9, 1943. Charlie wrote that he had tried to enlist in the Air Force and had passed all of his tests but since he was not a citizen, his papers had to go through Washington D.C. and he was waiting.¹¹⁹ A few months after Mary Sanchez interviewed Joe Jaime on August 2, 2003, he sent copies of many of the letters and various pieces of paperwork to be part of his folder in the U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project archives. One of those letters was the letter from his brother Charlie; at the bottom of the copy Joe Jaime wrote a short message: “This is a copy of a letter I received from my younger brother (he had just turned 18) Carlos in which he tells me about trying to enlist in the Air Force. The papers that he talks about never got back from Washington D.C. so guess where he wound-up, in the Army Infantry, of course.” During a war with so many casualties, many soldiers were placed in the infantry but Mexican-American soldiers felt that they were intentionally placed in infantry units. For Mexican-American soldiers “frontline duty was the rule rather than the exception.”¹²⁰

Mexican-American civil rights groups like MAM had long contended that education would be the key to Mexican-American success in the United States. Mexican-American service members felt the detrimental effects from the lack of educational opportunities available to them in their youth, which reinforced even more the importance of formal education to success in the United States.

¹¹⁹ Although the Jaime brothers were not born in the United States, I chose to include their stories for a few reasons. They were brought to the United States to live in Kansas City, Kansas at a very young age with their parents and entered the country legally planning to stay and build a life in the states. Had they been migratory workers planning to return to Mexico, they would not have been included, but their parents brought them as children and they were raised in America. In addition to their plans to stay in the United States, after serving in the United States military soldiers who were not already citizens were naturalized and granted citizenship. At the point of the Joe Jaime’s interview in 2003, he and his brothers had long been American citizens.

¹²⁰ Ramos, 2.

Sometimes rather than test Mexican Americans, as was the case with Mr. Acosta, the military would automatically place soldiers. Dr. Hector Garcia, even with a medical degree was not initially given a medic position because the Army did not believe that he, as an individual of Mexican descent, was capable of attaining a Medical Degree. After spending many years in the Army reserves throughout college and completing his residency, Dr. Hector Garcia volunteered for military service. Garcia volunteered to be a medical officer but instead was placed in the infantry.¹²¹ The Army did not believe that Dr. Garcia, as a Mexican, could be educated enough to be a doctor, before he shipped out, however, they did take a second look at his credentials and asked him if he really was a doctor. The Army not only questioned whether or not he was actually a real doctor but when he said that he was, they asked him if he had graduated from a medical school in Mexico. He assured them that he graduated from a medical school in the United States.¹²² Not only had Garcia graduated from an accredited American university, he had graduated from the University of Texas top ten in his class and after his residency Garcia completed a surgical internship.¹²³ After being transferred out of an infantry unit, Dr. Hector Garcia arrived in North Africa as a surgeon for an engineering group in 1942.¹²⁴

Dr. Garcia was eventually promoted to the rank of Captain in the military. The problem with this is that Captain was the rank given to medical doctors when they *first* entered the Army. Dr. Hector Garcia, as a Mexican serving in the United States Army and a medical doctor with a degree from an American university, not only was at-

¹²¹ "LATINO AMERICANS" documentary: "Episode 3: War and Peace."

¹²² "LATINO AMERICANS" documentary: "Episode 3: War and Peace."

¹²³ Allsup, 31.

¹²⁴ Suarez, 106.

first denied the position of medical officer and placed in the infantry, but even once he was assigned to the position of medical officer had to wait to promote to a rank given to Anglo soldiers with the same qualifications upon entrance. Despite all of this, Hector Garcia, like many other upper-class Mexican Americans, felt that Mexican Americans would be able to earn equality through education. Garcia's mindset from high school and college carried over into his military career—that if Mexican Americans strove to succeed they would eventually be accepted into Anglo society.

Even for Latino soldiers who were assessed before they were placed in a military job, more often than not their educational backgrounds did not give them a foundation equal to that of their Anglo peers. As the statistic mentioned previously stated, Mexican-American youth dropped out of school for varying reasons and in high numbers. Although there were exceptions as in the case of Dr. Hector Garcia, in general Mexican-American soldiers had lower education levels, which made it difficult for Mexican American soldiers' test results to compete with the test scores of Anglos with High School diplomas and even some college.

Having limited education also limited Mexican Americans in their potential for higher ranks within the service. Mexican-American Officers were not unheard of in the military during the Second World War, but they were uncommon, partially due to explicit racism but implicitly because in order to become an Officer, one had to have earned a college degree. Enrique Cervantes who attained his goal of becoming a pilot and ultimately reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel remembered the very first time he saw a Mexican-American Officer in the United States military.

I'd never seen a Mexican officer before. I'd seen any number of privates, and I don't think I ever recall seeing a sergeant."¹²⁵ Mr. Cervantes recalled seeing a brand new second lieutenant in the infantry with his family and hiding behind a post to watch them interact and saw how proud his family was of him. Cervantes who had been struggling with all of the discrimination he was facing in his training in Arizona said to himself, "Mud, fud, or blood you're going to stay in this program even if it kills you" as he imagined what it would mean to his family if he could complete officer school.¹²⁶ Mr. Cervantes stuck it out and earned his pilot wings ultimately serving in World War II as a pilot in the 100th Bombardment Group. Cervantes's achievement in being a Mexican American and becoming a military officer and pilot was uncommon and gave him a sense of pride and accomplishment. For Mexican Americans who before the War were unsure of their status and what treatment they deserved, success and accomplishments in their military careers provided them with a sense of entitlement to equal opportunities as American citizens and encouraged them to strive for equal success in their civilian lives.

Roberto Gonzalez was another Mexican-American soldier who was an exception to the infantry rule. His background demonstrates that despite still having to struggle against racism, Mexican Americans with more economic status earlier on in their lives had a sturdier foundation making it more likely for them to succeed as they grew older. It was lower-class Mexican Americans who had a much more difficult time breaking the cycle of poverty and force their way out of the mold. The Gonzalez family's middle-

¹²⁵ Enrique "Henry/Hank" Cervantes, interview.

¹²⁶ Enrique "Henry/Hank" Cervantes, interview.

class status provided more opportunities for Roberto than lower-class Mexican-Americans had available to them.

Roberto's father owned a grocery store and while Roberto did work at his father's store in high school, he was not only able to complete his education, but he was also a member of the National Honors Society and played baseball and basketball.¹²⁷

Roberto's family did not need him to quit school to work so he was able to successfully attain a high school diploma. But even Gonzalez's academic success did not protect him from racism in school. Roberto Gonzalez attended a segregated grammar school and then attended integrated middle school and high school. In his high school, Mexican-American students were not allowed to swim in the pool that the Anglo students swam in and many high school clubs and organizations were off limits to Latinos as well.

Gonzalez was fortunate that he was able to focus on his studies throughout school so that when he was drafted in 1943 and given IQ and aptitude tests, he scored very high. Because of his high scores Roberto was placed in the Army Air Corps and became a radio operator. Had Gonzalez not had the opportunity to focus on his education during his youth and at the very least complete high school, it would have been unlikely for him to score so highly and end up in the Air Corps rather than infantry. Although, American soldiers who had access to education in their youth sometimes had better opportunities as adults in the military, Dr. Garcia's story demonstrates that even the most educated Mexican Americans had to prod the military to allow them to work within their areas of expertise.

¹²⁷ Roberto Gonzalez. Interviewed by Kevin and Sharon Bales, videotape recording, June 17, 2000. U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. All other mention of Roberto Gonzales is from this interview unless otherwise stated.

The struggles associated with the racism Mexican Americans experienced in their youth affected their military opportunities both explicitly and implicitly. Sometimes Latino soldiers felt the implicit detriments that were caused by their lack of educational opportunity as school-age students. Other times, as in the case of Dr. Garcia, Mexican-American soldiers were explicitly discriminated against not because of their lack of education but rather because of their Mexican descent and the stereotypes of Mexican Americans as being less intelligent and capable. Mexican Americans regularly experienced racism in their lives from their youth deep into their adulthood. The racism they experienced early on had an impact on each sequential phase of their lives. The discrimination that Mexican-American soldiers identified through the biased placement they experienced during their wartime service demonstrated to them a culmination of years of racism and the built up negative effects of that inequality. They realized that even as they were serving their country the inequality persisted.

CHAPTER 4

THE VETERAN ARGUMENT AND COMBATTING SOCIAL RACISM

For Mexican Americans who had long sought to be fully accepted into mainstream Anglo culture, many thought that their military service in World War II would lead to that acceptance. In making the sacrifice of risking their lives and many even losing them, Latinos hoped that the second-class treatment they were accustomed to would change when they proved their complete allegiance to the United States through serving their country in the Armed Forces. Unfortunately as these soldiers returned home expecting a better and more equal life, they returned to a country where not much had improved. This led to the realization that if they wanted their lives to improve, they were going to have to find a way to petition change to which Anglos would respond in an affirmative manner.

Mexican American veterans emboldened by their wartime experience and harboring a new sense of entitlement, demanded the full benefits of American citizenship. The climate of democracy and patriotism during and in the years following the Second World War provided a platform upon which Mexican-American veterans could gain momentum in seeking equality in the country they had helped to defend. These veterans felt that they had fought just as bravely and sacrificed just as much as Anglo soldiers had done.

Mexican-American soldiers felt they had served in the military valiantly, as evidenced by the many honors and commendations they earned. Seventeen Latinos in the United States military were awarded with the Medal of Honor for their heroic service

in World War II. It is difficult to gather statistics on Mexican-American military service during the War due to the fact that they were legally considered Caucasian so statistics separate from Anglo statistics were not tracked. Historians do however estimate that Mexican-American casualties were disproportionately higher in proportion to their population.¹²⁸ It is also estimated that Mexican-American youth served in larger percentages than any other “ethnic/racial group...during World War II.”¹²⁹ They are also the most highly decorated group in proportion to the number who served and not even one soldier with a Spanish surname was ever recorded as to have deserted, nor was one of them ever charged with cowardice or treason.¹³⁰

For every Mexican-American soldier who was recognized and awarded for their commendable service, multiple others went without recognition and thanks. Just as Mexican Americans had experienced inequality in their civilian life, they experienced inequality in the recognition of their war service. The pride these veterans felt about their military service combined with the inequality they continued to face, pushed Mexican-American World War II veterans to push for social equality.

Just like their Anglo counterparts, Mexican-American soldiers were subject to torture and hardship as prisoners of war that had long-lasting effects on their civilian lives. When these veterans returned home to the United States and realized that even after the immense sacrifices they had made, they still were refused services as simple

¹²⁸ Henry A. J. Ramos, *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1998), 2.

¹²⁹ Richard Steele, “The Federal Government Discovers Mexican Americans” in *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*. Richard Griswold Del Castillo ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 20.

¹³⁰ Henry A. J. Ramos, 2.

as being served in certain restaurants just as they had been before the war, they were emboldened to demand better.

Philip James Benavides had loved music from a young age and joined the U.S. Marine Corps in 1941 because he wanted “to go into the band.”¹³¹ As the war developed, his service in the band became a secondary duty and his unit was called to act as medics. Benavides served in four major landings but it was the Battle of New Britain in 1943 when he was captured as a prisoner of war.

Benavides and eleven other men had gone out on patrol and when they returned the Japanese had occupied their camp. The Japanese took the twelve men as prisoners and immediately began torturing them trying to get information out of them. The Japanese would beat their prisoners with bamboo sticks, electrically shock them, and submerge them under water filled with leeches. They would also tie him up and leave him in the sun and sometimes cover him with honey and put him on an anthill.

Once the Japanese heard noise in the jungle and knew the Allies were approaching they began to kill their American prisoners. One of the Japanese soldiers had a gun to Benavides’s head and pulled the trigger twice, the gun did not go off. Philip, broken by the torture and having lost his will to live showed his captor that the clip was not in the gun. The Japanese soldier corrected his error and pulled the trigger two more times, still the gun did not function. Mr. Benavides feels that God was on his side.¹³² It was then that the Australian Allies arrived and rescued the prisoners.

¹³¹ Philip James Benavides, interviewed by Robert Rivas, interview videotape recording, El Paso, Texas, 7 July 2003, U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. All further mention of Philip Benavides is obtained from this interview unless otherwise noted.

¹³² Philip James Benavides, interview.

At the time of their rescue, Mr. Benavides had been held as a prisoner for approximately three months. He had weighed two hundred and twenty-five pounds when he entered the military and weighed one hundred and forty-two pounds when he was rescued. Benavides had been captured along with eleven other men, their treatment was so poor that by the time he was rescued only four of the other men were still alive.

Benavides earned a Bronze Star, Purple Heart, World War II Victory Medal, good conduct medals, and campaign ribbons. But awards were not the only thing that Benavides brought home with him after the War. He had been left completely blind in his left eye from an injury earlier in the war and as a result of his torture while in captivity, he had partially lost his hearing and become tone deaf, he also could no longer properly move his fingers and lips leaving him unable to follow his passion in playing French horn. Because of his injuries, Benavides gave up music completely.

When interviewed about his military service, Benavides said that he hopes that in the future people will see that Chicanos did their part in World War II. Continuing “I know there are areas in the United States where our people are looked down on, so we have to fight not with guns and knives, but with our cabezas [heads].”¹³³ Mr. Benavides did much more than his part in World War II, not just giving a few years of his life but because of his experiences while serving having to give up his greatest passion, music. Mr. Benavides knew that he had sacrificed a large part of his life and expressed his desire for future generations to acknowledge the wartime service of Mexican-American

¹³³ Philip James Benavides, interview. I added the translation of the last word in his statement to the quote.

soldiers. Mexican Americans, who had been willing to turn a cheek to a certain degree of racism before the war, felt that their sacrifice merited better treatment afterward.

The story of Philip Benavides' suffering as a prisoner of war, demonstrates that Mexican-American veterans shared the victories and defeats of World War II just as Anglo soldiers had. Through their own experiences Mexican-American veterans felt that they had contributed equally to Anglos in their support of the War.¹³⁴

William Carrillo was another Mexican-American soldier who risked his life for his country at great personal expense and remembered his contribution to the War with pride. He wanted to join the Army Air Corps Cadet program but could not be accepted because he did not have a college degree. On the place on the application where applicants were to list their college, Carrillo wrote "College of Hard Knox." He slipped through the cracks before anyone looked closely enough at his application to realize what he had written in the college slot.¹³⁵

Carrillo was trained as a pilot and initially flew to England on a B-17 bomber. On May 24, 1944 while he was on his 55th mission, he was shot down over Berlin. Carrillo bailed out and his legs crashed through the roof of a house into the attic. An elderly man pulled him into the house and handed him over to the Gestapo.

Carrillo was interrogated and tortured for the next two weeks. He was left with various injuries including broken toes. After determining that they were not going to get any information out of Carrillo, they handed him over to be held in a prisoner of war

¹³⁴ This is evidenced by Guy Gabaldon's frustration that even with his valiant capture of so many Japanese soldiers, he was passed over for promotions and commendations that many of his Anglo peers received for much less remarkable acts. This is also supported by Philip Benavides expressing to his interviewer that he hoped that in the future people will see that Chicanos did their part in World War II.

¹³⁵ William Carrillo, interviewed by Mario Barrera, Daly City, California, on 7 June, 2001, interview videotape recording, U.S. Latino & Latina World War II Oral History Project. All other mention of William Carrillo is obtained from this interview unless otherwise noted.

camp in Poland. While in the camp, Carrillo experienced continued questioning although with lesser violence than what the Gestapo had inflicted. While he was there, Carrillo said the Germans had a lot of information on him even up until just a few days before his bomber was shot down. While in captivity Carrillo was offered the opportunity to join the Luftwaffe in fighting against the Russians, for which he would be rewarded with women, an offer which the American soldier rejected.

As the Soviets were advancing through Poland Carrillo and the other prisoners were moved to a prisoner of war camp near Munich, Germany. It was there that they were liberated. While in captivity Carrillo was promoted to the rank of Captain but upon his return to the United States he was never given his wages that had accumulated while he was in captivity. Carrillo claims that the Army lost his records of serving in World War II and have not paid him his dues since then. Because of this, Carrillo claims that the government owes him over \$600,000. Just as Mr. Carrillo had been shorted in relation to the wages to which he was entitled, many other returning Mexican-American veterans had been shorted in regard to the equality to which they felt they had earned the right while serving in World War II.

When Carrillo returned from the service, he went back to work at MJB Coffee as a janitor, the same job he had worked before he left. Carrillo said that Mexicans were not considered smart enough to do any other type of work. Carrillo said that eventually one of the owners found out that he had flown a plane in the War and thought that in order to be a pilot Carrillo “had more brains, so he gave me a really good job.”¹³⁶ This is a specific way in which military participation in World War II had an impact on returning veterans. It was Carrillo’s impressive military job that led his boss to take a second look

¹³⁶ William Carrillo, interview.

at the preconceived idea he had of his Mexican-American employee. Another integral factor in Carrillo's job improvement was his employer's willingness to promote him once he had gained new information about Carrillo's background. Social improvement was dependent upon those in decision-making positions of power to be willing to make or at least allow concessions toward change. Unfortunately not all employers were like Carrillo's and willing to allow for change. Even after the War, many other talented and skilled Latinos were passed over for good jobs because of this common assumption that they were less intelligent and capable.

After making great sacrifices for their country, Mexican Americans felt they deserved better treatment than what they had become accustomed to before the War. They hoped that they would return to a newfound equality and better treatment, which they felt they had earned as soldiers in the United States military. Andrew Aguirre said that being in the Marines during World War II gave him a "sense of belonging" and "a sense of importance, because you're part of something big" and it causes one to "take pride in yourself."¹³⁷ After his sacrifice, Andrew Aguirre was transformed as were many other Mexican Americans and was not willing to return to the extremely low-paying labor he had worked at for his entire life before the War.¹³⁸ He now knew he deserved an equal opportunity at more skilled and better paying work and would not accept less.

Serving in World War II completely changed the expectations of John Sótelo as well. Sótelo stated that, "When I went to war, and I fought for this country, I figured that

¹³⁷ Richard Griswold del Castillo, "The Paradox of War: Mexican American Patriotism, Racism, and Memory," in *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation*, ed. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez & Emilio Zamora (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 18. These are quotes from statements by Andrew Aguirre quoted in Griswold del Castillo's chapter.

¹³⁸ Dionicio Valdés, "Now Get Back to Work," in in *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation*, ed. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez & Emilio Zamora (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 60.

[U.S.] flag was mine.”¹³⁹ He was not alone in feeling this way. After serving in World War II, Mexican Americans identified as fully American. Jesse Ybarra directly stated that after serving in World War II, he felt “more of an American than I was before.”¹⁴⁰ Carlos Santillán felt that the military made soldiers “stand up and think for yourself.”¹⁴¹ Before the War Mexican Americans questioned where they stood in American society and what their rights were but after they had begun to see themselves as fully American, Latino veterans used their military service as a justification of why they had a right to demand the equality they were seeking.

Just as important as the internal changes that took place amongst Mexican-American veterans were the changes that World War II affected in Anglo Americans. All of the pushing in the world on the part of Mexican Americans fighting of civil rights would have made little difference had some Anglos not been at least somewhat willing to accept change. The political climate of World War II created an environment in which improvements in the face of social racism could manifest. During World War II the rhetoric of democracy was common and widespread. Gary Gerstle argues that as the Allies fought against racism in Germany, it became impossible to ignore racism in the United States.¹⁴² Gerstle also argues that because the confrontation against racism took place during wartime the fight was “framed in patriotic terms.”¹⁴³ The fact that discrimination had been so condemned in Germany as part of World War II allowed Mexican Americans to argue that racism was un-American. The widespread support of

¹³⁹ Steven Rosales, “Fighting the Peace at Home: Mexican American Veterans and the 1944 GI Bill of Rights,” *Pacific Historical Review* 80, no. 4 (November 2011): 620.

¹⁴⁰ Rosales, 620.

¹⁴¹ Rosales, 620.

¹⁴² Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 192.

¹⁴³ Gerstle, 193.

the War on the home front in the United States allowed Mexican Americans to rely heavily on their veteran status in their requests for equality.

In a letter written September 7, 1945 United States Army veteran Francisco Moralez wrote a letter to Kansas Governor Andrew Schoeppel asking if he could please do something about the discrimination in his hometown faced by Mexican Americans and especially Mexican-American veterans. In his letter, Moralez noted that discrimination had been a problem in his community for the past ten to fifteen years. He goes on to state that as a veteran he has fought to increase democracy and has earned the rights to the privileges afforded to whites, even so he and “thousands more” of his peers who fought with the allies and won are denied their rights in his town of Lyons, Kansas:

And personally, and I'm sure you will agree with me, I think I have just as many rights and privale ges and opportunities that my country has to offer me and my pepple.[sic]¹⁴⁴

Moralez goes on to reiterate his point that Mexican-American citizens have fought for their country and some even gave their lives and still veterans had returned to a country “to find a greater problem confronting them and no one to look up to but someone with authority.” To Moralez, Governor Schoeppel was that person of authority from whom he sought help.

Moralez was also conscious of the difference in the treatment he received while he was in the service and later in his civilian life. In his letter Moralez said that there were various business that discriminated against residents of Mexican descent but

¹⁴⁴ Francisco Moralez, letter to Governor Andrew Schoeppel, September 7, 1945. Kansas Historical Society: Kansas Memory. Governor's files, Governor Schoeppel, Box 56, Folder 5.

specified four specific businesses by name, one of which served him while he was in the military and refused him service once he had been discharged:

Three times prior to my discharge I entered the Coronado Inn, my wife and I, and was cheerfully served and was most welcomed and one week later after receiving my medical discharge from the Army, I entered the same restaurant and was completely ignored and was told to get out of there that they could not serve my race and the proprietor told me that that was the general custom at Lyons. So I left.[sic]¹⁴⁵

Discussing discrimination in the movie theater, Morales stated “I certainly do not believe that all of this is at all fair, especially for us ex servicemen and the ones that are still in the service.”¹⁴⁶ Again Morales relied on military service as the backbone of his argument against social discrimination and one more time in closing his letter Francisco reminded the governor that he had fought for the privileges he is seeking, “privileges that we fought for and that we more so deserve.”[sic]¹⁴⁷

Morales justified his seeking better treatment on the basis that he had served the country in World War II. He did not ask to be treated equally because racism was wrong, rather because through his service he felt he had earned a right to equal treatment and full citizenship in the United States. Rather than try to convince Anglos of their whiteness as Mexican Americans had fought to do for so long, after the Second World War equal rights were not always or only demanded on the basis of Mexican Americans being legally Caucasian but rather because they were American veterans.

Although their time in the service was in no way free of racism, for many Mexican Americans it was their first taste of being at least a step closer to full citizenship in various social settings. Even though many interview subjects did experience situations

¹⁴⁵ Francisco Morales, letter to Governor Andrew Schoeppel, September 7, 1945.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

when they were asked to leave theatres or restaurants, often after stating that they were soldiers and unwilling to move, were not further challenged by the social establishment. In Mr. Morales's letter to Governor Schoepel, he mentions that he was served three times at the Coronado Inn while in the military but as soon as he was discharged they would no longer serve him. Morales was not willing to give up in his civilian life the small taste of equality he had experienced as a result of his military service.

Francisco Morales was not alone. Once back in the United States, Mexican-American soldiers quickly noticed the pattern of issues with receiving their military benefits and banded together in order to take action against it. Upon his return from serving in World War II, Dr. Hector Garcia began to practice medicine in Texas. He had made an arrangement with the Veterans Administration that he would treat veterans with "service-connected illnesses" and then send the bills to the Veterans Administration. Dr. Garcia would sometimes treat these men at the Corpus Christi Naval Base Hospital but had trouble securing the necessary amount of beds. The hospital claimed the reason was because they were a Naval hospital and not a Veterans hospital.¹⁴⁸ As Hector Garcia looked further into the matter he came across more problems regarding Mexican American veterans and their benefits.

As he investigated deeper, Dr. Garcia saw a pattern of inequality in the allocation of Mexican-American veterans' benefits. The problem had persisted for a long time and was a result of the Veterans Administration offices of Texas. Even though the Washington D.C. Veterans Administration had sought to deliver benefits in a timely manner the Texas administration was uncooperative with Dr. Garcia's patients most of

¹⁴⁸ Carl Allsup, *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, 1982), 33.

whom were Mexican American.¹⁴⁹ Compensation checks processed through the administration were generally six to eight months overdue.

The Veterans Administration of Texas stalled more than just medical compensation checks and treatment for Mexican Americans. Hispanics who applied for formal education benefits regularly had their applications processed so late that there was not enough time for them to attend school. In addition, already small disability checks were minimized and even entirely eliminated without review.¹⁵⁰ Mexican-American veterans, as a general rule, had trouble with all facets of the veterans benefits to which they were entitled.

It is quite apparent that Mexican-American veterans experienced explicit racism in the years following World War II in regard to the benefits of the GI Bill of Rights. Lizabeth Cohen's case study highlights the implicit ways in which members of lower social classes were unable to take full advantage of the GI Bill and argues that the GI Bill was responsible for less social mobility among members of lower social classes than it has been given credit.¹⁵¹ Cohen states that investigations confirm that veterans who had completed high school and some college before the War were the most likely to take advantage of the education benefits of the GI Bill and surveys of World War II veterans demonstrate that the majority of those who used the Bill's educational benefits would have gone to college regardless of access to the GI Bill.¹⁵² As established earlier, high numbers of Mexican Americans did not complete high school as they had dropped out of school to help supplement their family's income. After working for years

¹⁴⁹ Allsup, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Allsup, 33.

¹⁵¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 156.

¹⁵² Cohen, 156-157.

and many starting families, even with tuition help, Mexican-American bread-winners did not have the opportunity to return to life without an income. Cohen's take away is that the benefits of the GI Bill helped minority veterans to obtain better-paying working-class jobs but it did not for the most part propel minorities into the middle-class.¹⁵³

As Mexican-American veterans fought against both implicit and explicit racism the state of Texas was not alone in attempting to slow and deny Mexican Americans of the benefits they had earned. John Sótelo recalled that in California, while he was enrolled in school, the GI Bill did not pay often and payment was often so late that he knew a lot of men who were forced to drop out of school. Sótelo felt that the Veterans Administration treated Mexican Americans "just plain goddamn rotten."¹⁵⁴ This was racism in an official sphere but by its very nature the issue was one of social racism. There is no evidence that would support that Veterans Administration policies mandated poor treatment toward minorities, rather it was the commonality of racist intentions of individual workers that propelled the inequalities.

Benito Padilla was a veteran whose check was long overdue. He had not received a check for six months. His wife was very sick and he begged her doctor to treat her until his payment arrived. Not only did Padilla have a sick wife to care for but he and his wife had a child as well. The Red Cross did help the family on a few occasions but despite having visited the Veterans Administration fourteen times, his problem was left uncorrected.¹⁵⁵ Disbursement of benefits may have been delayed for multiple reasons. Many subjects of this thesis felt the reason was discrimination. Another possible factor could be the huge mass of cases being serviced at the time.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 157.

¹⁵⁴ Rosales, 597.

¹⁵⁵ Allsup, 34.

Regardless of the reason for the delays, Mexican-American veterans saw that they needed a channel through which they could express their grievances and seek improvements.

American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars groups in the Corpus Christi, Texas area would not represent Mexican-American veterans so they had to create their own veterans' rights groups.¹⁵⁶ American Legion outposts in California would not represent Mexican Americans either. Mexican-American veterans' experiences during the war had manifested into a desire for change. When existing groups would not accept them into their ranks, Latino veterans created their own groups as venues to solicit improvement. John Sótelo recalled trying to join the American Legion in California along with 150 to 200 other Mexican Americans who wanted to join and being rejected. The Legion told them that they should form an outpost of their own.¹⁵⁷ As Mexican Americans were excluded from Anglo veterans groups, forming their own groups was exactly what they began to do. Dr. Hector Garcia organized and advertised a public meeting to discuss the persistent issue of unequal veteran benefit distribution. The meeting was held on March 26, 1948 at the Lamar School in Corpus Christi and more than 700 men attended. The large number of attendees demonstrates how great the need for change truly was.

At the meeting men principally discussed their concern with financial benefits and medical care. A city-county service officer also provided the information that 300 veterans had used the GI Bill of Rights to enroll in school in September of 1947 and

¹⁵⁶ Allsup, 33-34.

¹⁵⁷ Rosales, 618.

they did not receive their checks until January of 1948.¹⁵⁸ The men in attendance at the meeting decided to establish a permanent organization and elected Dr. Hector Garcia to be the President of the group. The group of men in attendance decided to call their organization the American GI Forum in order to highlight their status as veterans and American citizens.

It was Dr. Garcia's idea for their title to not directly connect the group with the Mexican-American community. They wanted their title to emphasize that although they were "distinct in ethnic and cultural orientation" they were also "just as American as Anglos."¹⁵⁹ Every word of the groups name was decided with purpose. Government Issue (or GI) was a term that emerged during the War as slang for a soldier and so highlighted their military service to their country. They chose the word Forum to express the group's "commitment to open public discourse and to the principles and ideals of democracy."¹⁶⁰

The Forum's logo was also planned with purpose and highlighted the organizations American patriotism. The logo consisted of a red, white, and blue American flag and thirteen stars to represent the original thirteen colonies. The Forum also tied in their religious consciousness by placing the thirteenth star at the upper center above their name symbolizing the Star of David.¹⁶¹ Every aspect of the Forum was intentional and well planned.

¹⁵⁸ Allsup, 34.

¹⁵⁹ Ramos, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

In addition to Dr. Garcia, lawyer Gustavo Garcia (no relation) was also extremely active in organizing the Forum.¹⁶² While he organized the group after the example of many other veterans' organizations, they also sought civil rights denied to Mexican Americans. They staunchly chose to reach their goals through non-violent measures. The general objectives of the American GI Forum were to offer aid to veterans, develop leadership in the Mexican American community, "preserve and advance the principles of democracy," and help further education for students.¹⁶³ The Forum had their sights set on expanding throughout the rest of Texas and the United States and did so rapidly in the following years. Locally, they became effective right away and benefits that had been delayed for up to two years were received within six weeks of the Forum's intervention.¹⁶⁴

For Mexican-American civil rights groups, emphasizing their military service in World War II was new and powerful tactic. They equated Americanism with military service and in doing so deemed it unpatriotic to discriminate against American veterans—white or brown skinned. The events that followed the death of Felix Longoria and the equality battle that ensued were a victory for Mexican-American veterans who were demanding better treatment based off of their military service.

It was the case of Felix Longoria that opened the larger American public's eyes to the American GI Forum and the civil rights they were fighting for. Private First Class Felix Longoria was killed in action in the Philippines in 1945 while serving the United States Army in World War II. His body was returned to his family in the United States in 1949. Felix had not been drafted, rather he had volunteered and enlisted in the United

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 5-6.

¹⁶⁴ Ramos, 8.

States Army when he was twenty-six years old. For his service Felix Longoria was awarded posthumously with a Bronze Service Star, a Purple Heart, a Good Combat Medal, and a Combat Infantryman's Badge.¹⁶⁵

After Longoria's death, his body had remained in the Philippines until November of 1948 when the army contacted Beatrice Longoria, Felix's widow, telling her that his body was set to arrive in San Francisco. The Army wanted to know where Beatrice would like to have her husband's body interred. After Felix's death, Beatrice along with their young daughter Adelita had moved back to Corpus Christi to live with Beatrice's parents. Even so, Beatrice decided that she would have Felix's body interred in Three Rivers, Texas where she and Felix had lived together and where his family still lived as well.¹⁶⁶

Beatrice travelled to Three Rivers, Texas to meet with the owner of the only funeral home in town to discuss the details of her husband's funeral service. When Beatrice asked to use the funeral home's chapel for her husband's wake Mr. Rice suggested that Beatrice hold the wake in Felix's parents' home, which was large enough to accommodate a wake. Beatrice did not want to do so because Felix's parents were upset with her about a man she was dating but she did not want to share this personal information with the men. Without giving them a reason, Beatrice told them that she would rather use the funeral home's chapel than Felix's parents' home for the wake. Kennedy told Beatrice that she could not use the chapel for the services because "the whites would not like it."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Patrick J. Carroll. *Felix Longoria's Wake: Bereavement, Racism, and the Rise of Mexican American Activism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 55.

¹⁶⁶ Carroll, 55.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 56.

Although it was too small to accommodate a funeral, without running water or electricity, and had not been occupied in years Beatrice decided she would have to hold the wake in her and Felix's old home in Three Rivers. As Beatrice thought more about the funeral home denying her use of their chapel, she became more and more upset and again travelled to Three Rivers to try and persuade Tom Kennedy to allow her use of the chapel.¹⁶⁸

Even after seeing the insufficiency of the house for a wake and Beatrice asking to use the chapel a second time, Tom Kennedy again denied her request. Beatrice even brought up her husband's military service and asked if an exception could be made for a soldier.¹⁶⁹ Kennedy told Beatrice that he had also served in the War and that while he did not mind Felix's body being his funeral home's chapel he "couldn't do it because the whites would object to it."¹⁷⁰ Mr. Kennedy told Beatrice that he was concerned about the implications for his business. Kennedy again suggested that Beatrice hold the wake in the home of Felix's parents.

Beatrice's sister Sara Moreno knew Dr. Hector Garcia who was the sponsor of a Mexican-American young women's group of which she had served as president and after hearing about her sisters' denial to use the chapel, decided to contact him about the discrimination her sister was facing. Dr. Garcia wanted to verify the details of Beatrice's story before taking any action so she and her sister Sara went to meet with him. Beatrice had decided that the small home in Three Rivers was inadequate to hold the wake for her husband. She asked that if nothing could be done to allow her use of the chapel in Three Rivers, would Dr. Garcia help her to arrange services in Corpus

¹⁶⁸ Carroll, 57, 58.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 59.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 59.

Christi. Garcia told Beatrice that he would arrange a burial with full military honors for Felix in Corpus Christi and that the GI Forum would sponsor it. But Dr. Garcia also promised that he would do what he could in regard to Kennedy.

Dr. Garcia called Tom Kennedy on behalf of Beatrice Longoria again asking to use the chapel for the services. Since Garcia thought the matter was serious he asked his secretary, Gladys Blucher, to listen to the phone call. Kennedy again denied use of the chapel to the Longoria family because “the white people just don’t like it.”¹⁷¹ Dr. Garcia asked Kennedy if it made any difference at all that Longoria was a veteran to which Kennedy replied:

That doesn’t make any difference. You know how the Latin people get drunk and lay around all the time. The last time we let them use the chapel, they got all drunk and we just can’t control them—so the white people object to it, and we just can’t let them use it. I’m sure you’ll understand, and it’s just like I told Beatrice. I don’t dislike Mexican people but I have to run my business so I can’t do that. You understand the whites here won’t like it.¹⁷²

Dr. Garcia who knew the power of publicity, contacted a reporter for the *Corpus Christi Caller* named George Groh. Groh verified the story with Kennedy, being completely transparent about the fact that he may recount Kennedy’s statements in the newspaper. Despite the fact that Kennedy had told Garcia he did not want to allow Mexicans in the chapel because of bad experiences in the past, Kennedy told Mr. Groh that the funeral home had never “made a practice” of allowing Mexicans use the chapel and he did not want to start.¹⁷³ Groh told Mr. Kennedy that it seemed he had a serious issue on his hands and Kennedy did not seem to take the comment very seriously.

¹⁷¹ Carroll, 62.

¹⁷² Ibid, 63.

¹⁷³ Carroll, 63.

When Groh called Kennedy again the next day he now said that although he discouraged the use of the funeral home for the Longoria family, that he would not refuse its use. Even this early on, the seriousness of the matter was setting in and Kennedy was beginning to change his story as more parties got involved.

Dr. Garcia began sending out telegrams and notifying public officials and the media of the issue in order to seek public support. Garcia also called an American GI Forum meeting to inform members of what was going on. From government officials, for the most part, Garcia received responses in the form of condolences but nobody responded willing to assist in any way. United States Senator Lyndon Baines Johnson did make arrangements to help and responded with a telegram describing how:

I deeply regret that the prejudice of some individuals extends even beyond this life. I have no authority over civilian funeral homes. Nor does the federal government. I have today made arrangements to have Felix Longoria buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery here in Washington, where the honored dead of our nation's wars rest.¹⁷⁴

The issue was now getting a lot of attention and Tom Kennedy had since contacted Beatrice Longoria and informed her that if she wished, she may use the Manon Rice Funeral Home's chapel. The Good Neighbor Commission of Texas had also contacted Beatrice about burying Felix in San Antonio. Clearly news of the story had spread fast, proving the power of the media that Harry Vaughn had encouraged Dr. Garcia to use as a tool. General Harry Vaughn was an aide to President Truman and in response to Dr. Garcia's original telegram he sent a reply stating: "Discrimination and intolerance unfortunately not illegal. Public opinion only weapon for use against such as Funeral

¹⁷⁴ Carroll, 66.

Director in Three Rivers.”¹⁷⁵ The democratic climate of “the good war” was the perfect environment to fight for equal treatment of Mexican-American veterans through the story of a fallen Mexican-American serviceman who had been denied his rights to a proper funeral.

Due to how far news of the Longoria incident had spread, Beatrice Longoria now had multiple options of where and how to lay her husband to rest. As the case had developed from one woman’s issue trying to provide a proper burial for her husband into a much larger civil rights issue regarding a war hero, Dr. Garcia asked Beatrice if they could vote on the decision at an American GI Forum meeting. She consented and the majority of those in attendance at the meeting elected to have Felix Longoria buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Felix Longoria had given his life in service to a country that did not allow him the full rights of citizenship and those voting on where to lay Felix to rest felt that he deserved a hero’s burial. After the publicity the issue had gathered, it was important for the GI Forum to make a statement with the final decision they made as to where they would bury Longoria. For a Mexican-American soldier who had fallen in battle and originally been denied use of a small town funeral parlor’s facilities because of his race, to be finally laid to rest among the nation’s most honored dead made a grand statement to anyone thinking about denying service to Mexican Americans and *especially* Mexican American veterans.

Not only did the GI Forum members feel that Felix Longoria deserved an honorable burial, the too saw the meaning behind choosing not to accept Tom Kennedy’s (later and amended) offer. Had Felix Longoria eventually had a service at Manon Rice Funeral Home and been buried in Three Rivers, Texas, it would have been

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

unlikely for Longoria's death and story to have permeated the country and history as it did. Refusing Kennedy's offer and accepting a United States Senator's offer to provide Felix Longoria a burial with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery was a demonstration of success in the fight championed by the GI Forum. Success in the Longoria case did not mean that racism in social spheres had been completely eradicated, but it was a move towards improvement in the fight for civil rights and a step to build upon.

The result of all of the publicity of the Longoria affair demonstrated that military service, especially around the World War II climate, was a tool that any Mexican American, regardless of class, could use in overcoming racial barriers. If a Mexican American man had been in the exact same situation as had Felix Longoria after his death but not been an American soldier (especially that had died during service), patriotic Anglo Americans would have likely shown little concern over the matter. The integral piece of the puzzle was the combination between Felix Longoria's military service and the patriotic and democratic climate of World War II. No laws or regulations were changed, no legal battles were undertaken, but in the court of public opinion the Longoria affair had made a statement to anyone who was accustomed to or considering continuing discriminating against Mexican-American veterans in the social sphere. In the fight against social racism, that could be fought by all classes of Mexican Americans in all areas of their lives, in contrast to the case of bureaucratic racism, mostly fought by middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans in the legal realm, World War II was the most influential moment in combatting inequality for Mexican Americans.

CONCLUSION

An undated memo given to all MAM members stated:

Experience reveals Equality, like its companion, Freedom, exists in four modes--
the Equality which God gives,
the Equality which the State gives,
the Equality which a man wins for himself,
the Equality which one bestows on another.¹⁷⁶

Along this train of thought, Mexican Americans felt they had already been created equal to Anglos by God. The equality that “the State gives” was what they had learned to fight for in the legal realm. The battle against official forms of racism such as bureaucratic racism and segregation had begun years before World War II in the early 1900s and continued during and after the War. This was the sphere through which Mexican Americans could stand up against bureaucratic racism and explicit segregation. Fighting formal forms of racism in the legal sphere gave Mexican-American civil rights groups a firm black and white realm where they could challenge the inequalities they faced.

The equality they had won for themselves they felt they had earned through their service in World War II. During the War, Mexican Americans had sacrificed just as their Anglo counterparts had. They felt that they had earned the full rights that come along with American citizenship and were less likely to passively accept the racism that they had before the War.

The “equality which one bestows on another” had to be won in the court of public opinion. It was their World War II military service that Mexican-American veterans used

¹⁷⁶ George J. Sanchez. *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 260. Although this memo was undated, MAM operated between the 1934 and 1950 so this would have been produced sometime within that time period.

to petition the Anglo American public to bestow equality upon them. After the War, when Mexican Americans petitioned for equal treatment when it came to social racism it was the sacrifice they made as soldiers that they used as a justification to Anglos for demanding equal treatment. The democratic rhetoric surrounding World War II and the emphasis on fighting inequality overseas combined with the Patriotic wartime spirit created an atmosphere where the veteran argument was a fruitful tool in seeking the equality “bestowed” by other Americans.

Mexican-American civil rights activists as well as individuals who were not associated with any specific group but still chose to stand up for themselves and seek change fought for and attained change in the form of both small and large victories. The civil rights battle in the realm of bureaucratic racism began long before World War II and would have likely continued down the same trajectory that it did with or without the War. Combatting social racism and changing people’s hearts and minds was a more difficult and less specific battle to fight. It was in the sphere of attempting to lessen social racism that World War II was an integral moment in time and tool for activists and individuals seeking equality. As Mexican Americans dealt with racism in both official bureaucratic realms and socially, they struggled to balance their feelings of knowing their rights as human beings were being violated with popular civil rights ideologies that encouraged them not to blame their struggles on racism. The dissonance created by this disconnect along with the reticence to acknowledge difference, led many Mexican Americans to downplay some instances of racism in order to lessen the discomfort caused by the conflict between their realities and ideologies.

For Mexican Americans, Tomás R. Jiménez's theory of ethnic replenishment is just as relevant today in 2015 as it was during World War II. Mexican Americans have been, and continue to be, one of the few immigrant groups that did not have a period of immigration to the United States with a general beginning and ending period.

Americans of Mexican descent have lived in the United States for hundreds of years and Mexican immigrants both documented and undocumented flow into the United States seeking a better life every day. Due in part to the continued flow of Mexican immigrants into the United States, combined with blind hate and ignorance, many Anglo Americans continue to group Mexican Americans with undocumented Mexican immigrants just as they had during the Second World War. Racism toward Mexican Americans has both continued and been renewed in recent years as the immigration debate has stoked the flames of hatred.

Unfortunately, the conflict Mexican Americans faced years ago, although improved in many ways, continues today and Mexican-American service members still seek equality and use their military commitments as a rationale for demanding the full rights of citizenship. In 2014, a Mexican-American man with a Hispanic surname, who wishes to remain anonymous, attempted to buy a few handcuff keys from an online law enforcement retailer.¹⁷⁷ We will call him G.I. Jose for purposes of this anecdote. Jose is both a law enforcement officer and officer in the United States military. Hand cuff keys are an item that can be easily purchased online without having to prove law enforcement status or show law enforcement identification. A few weeks after Jose made his order, he contacted the retailer as he had never received confirmation of the sale and the order had not arrived. The retailer, who many of his Anglo surnamed

¹⁷⁷ Anonymous interview subject. Interviewed March 1, 2015 by Emily Lopez in Rock Springs, Wyoming.

peers in law enforcement had previously ordered from, looked up his order status and notified Jose that if he wanted his order to be completed he would have to provide documentation proving his American citizenship. No mention of a need for law enforcement employment verification but rather his documentation status. Jose told the company representative, "I was born in this country. I am both a state law enforcement officer and an officer in the United States Army." He refused to comply with their requests and asked for his order to be cancelled immediately; he also informed them that he would never again purchase his law enforcement equipment and supplies from their company.¹⁷⁸

As Mexican Americans continue to seek equality in a country plagued with discrimination, they face an uphill battle. Americans of Mexican descent who serve in the United States military continue to take pride in their service and use that service as a vindication for their demands to be treated equally and protests when they are not. They also continue to face the internal battle of knowing when their rights are violated but not wanting to blame all their struggles on racism. Jose for instance, when being interviewed, stated that one could not know for sure whether or not the reason for the retailers demand for proof of citizenship was because of his Hispanic surname. It seems pretty clear to an outsider that when Anglo surnamed officers' orders went through without needed to prove citizenship, it is rather telling that Officer Jose was not afforded the same privilege.

As much as life in the United States for Mexican Americans has changed, it has stayed the same and change had occurred but comes in small phases "[v]ery slowly.

¹⁷⁸ Anonymous interview subject. Interviewed March 1, 2015 by Emily Lopez in Rock Springs, Wyoming

Very slowly.”¹⁷⁹ In the mid-1900s, MAM urged Mexican Americans to educate themselves and firmly believed that education would be their path to acceptance. Maybe they were on the right track. Hate and discrimination are rooted in ignorance. We must replace ignorance with accurate information and use the light of knowledge to drive out the hate of darkness. “[F]ight not with guns and knives, but with our cabezas.”¹⁸⁰ While education is valuable for anyone, perhaps it is not Hispanics who need to be educated but rather those who discriminate against them. It is only informative accurate education that will fill the void that ignorance has created.

¹⁷⁹ Mike Aguirre, interview.

¹⁸⁰ Philip James Benavides, interview.

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