José Rangel Cantú: South Texas' Fiery Radio Warrior

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May our people be better organized, more effectively active on behalf of all our needs . . . principally we need committed leaders and self-sacrificing organizers. José Cantú is an example of sincerity and dedication to his community . . .

Bert Corona, April 17, 1994
California labor leader

JOSÉ RANGEL CANTÚ, A CHARISMATIC AND CONTROVERSIAL MEXICAN AMERICAN RADIO BROADCASTER FOR KBOR in Brownsville, Texas, hosted a popular Sunday afternoon musical production in the 1940s and 50s. Known as the "*Programa Popular,*" his show ran from 2:30 to 4:00 P.M.[1] A talented broadcaster, and a gifted comedian, Cantú championed Chicano civil rights throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Just across the border, Cantú was born in Matamoros, Mexico, on February 23, 1912. He was two years old when he came to Brownsville with his mother, Refugia Cantú, who was desperate to earn a living. His father, known as Nacho, abandoned them and probably never married his mother. Cantú would never forget his humble origins.[2]

To help his mother, he worked as a shoeshine boy, and delivered groceries. Later he worked as a house painter. To satisfy his ambition, at night he took some business school courses. At home, Refugia inspired him. She gave him a love of words and a sense of cadence. She used to say, "People will always judge you on how you speak. When you say or pronounce a word, think twice."[3]

Every day he practiced his pronunciation in English and Spanish. He stood before a mirror to practice his speaking skills and gestures. Later, while standing straight, he would speak before his mother about a topic. Refugia challenged him to make a dull topic interesting. As a reward, they went to an evening movie or she would give him several comic books.

Language became Cantú's vehicle for self-esteem. As an adult, the lean, six-foot Cantú had a natural talent as a speaker. He applied this skill as a salesman in a paint store, where he met, María de Jesús Solis, known as Jesúsita or "Chucha."

While working long hours as a housepaint salesman, he fell in love with Chucha, who was a clerk at the store. While he courted her, she encouraged him to try radio commercials with his voice and his skill as a comedian. For the moment, Cantú took her remarks only as kind praise.

Chucha seemed very ordinary, at least on the surface. Her father was a carpenter. She managed to get an education in the local Catholic school in Brownsville. She considered herself lucky, since educational opportunities were few. Chucha, a quiet, strong woman, remained a serious reader. She was supportive of her husband and rarely complained.[4]

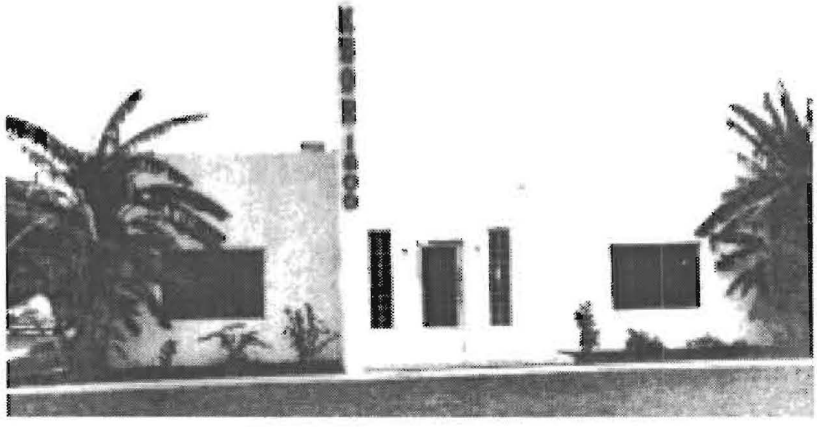
They married on March 19, 1936. Chucha was often described as "just his wife and a sales clerk." She was more than that. Without her, there might have never been a dynamic José Rangel Cantú. To him, she was his source of unique dignity and extraordinary strength.

Through Chucha's support, Cantú managed to keep an optimistic view of life despite overwhelming tradgedy. His oldest child, Hector, died of fever when he was eight years old. Then, his oldest daughter, Aurora, died at the age of nine months from an unknown illness. His only surviving child, Minerva, who looked so much like him, suffered from cancer. In the face of such tradgedy, Cantú trained himself to hide his sorrow and frustration from the public.

Chucha quickly discovered that Cantú's strength was his concern for his own people, *la gente humilde* (the Hispanic working class). Cantú used to tell his wife that he wanted to do something special to relieve them of their helplessness, oppression and low self-esteem. As a salesman, he loved to make customers laugh. In doing so, he helped himself. "It worked for him. By getting into their wounded psyches, he could get into his. Through them, he was reaching out for help."[5]

This housepaint salesman ingratiated himself to the public. Chucha continued to encourage Cantú to try his talent in radio. Besides, he could make more money and family expenses were slowly mounting with the illness of their daughter.[6]

Hearing about a job opening, Cantú went to a broadcaster, Primitivo Méndez.[7] He worked for KGBS, the "Har-Benito" Broadcasting station (it was located between Harlingen and San Benito), an affiliate of the Columbia Broadcasting System.[8] Under his mentor Méndez, Cantú learned about the radio business.



The Brownsville KBOR studio which broadcast Cantú's eloquence and compassion.

The station was housed in a white, one-story building out in the fields north of San Benito, its big radio tower rising from the back of the concrete brick building. While working there, Cantú learned of the brutal murders of Mexicans years before by Texas Rangers such as George Henry, Captain R.W. Aldrich, and Captain Frank Hamer. One of Hamer's aides, Bob Snow, remarked, "The Rangers got rough with those people, but they had to."[9]

As the prim and proper Miriam Chatelle noted, "Another incident was the time when the bodies of three Mexicans were discovered in the vicinity of where the radio station KGBS now stands, and when, for sanitary purposes, Scott Brown, a local farmer, had sent his teams and carts out there with a couple of Negroes, along with instructions to pile up some mesquite wood, place the bodies thereon and set fire to it."[10]

According to José Canales, Cantú used to say, "Our past is everywhere. It's an ugly one of oppression and misery. We are the victims. We cannot forget it. It is like a ghost that really hovers over the [Lower Rio Grande] Valley, permeating the dust that we breath."[11]

He did a variety of commercials after being offered another radio job by his friend, Andres Saldiva, at KBOR in Brownsville.[12] Cantú gave the commercials a comical twist. Enjoying his humor, the public wanted to hear more of Cantú. He had won them over, and he was now aware of the niche that he

occupied, and why his style worked. Despite his personal sorrows, Cantú meticulously fashioned himself into a major force at KBOR.[13]

His boss, Minor Wilson, the manager of KBOR, contended, "He was a natural. He just went on the air and told it how it was." His most enduring impressions were personal. "There were no nerves, no profanities and no mistakes when he spoke."[14]

Wilson decided to try Cantú on a Sunday afternoon variety show where one could find local talent and also make regional news engaging. The show, known as the "*Programa Popular*," was directed at Spanish-speaking listeners.

It started at 1:00 P.M. at first, then was moved to 2:30, a time when families were gathered together for entertainment. The program featured some exceptional talent, local news bulletins, and provocative interviews. It lasted from 1946 to 1952.

Cantú's folksy jokes were popular. He made certain that there was something in the show for everyone. He kept away from the cautious and traditional formats used by other stations, and despite what some critics said, the show worked.[15]

Every day Cantú would go first to the KBOR control room, and then would meet the individual entertainers and speakers for that day's program. The pageant attracted professional singers from Mexico and other Hispanic musicians. One of them was Lydia Mendoza from Houston. She sang "*Mal Hombre,*" ["Bad Man"], one of her biggest hits. Cantú encouraged her and her relatives to perform on the show.

With her family, she formed a musical group. As Mendoza noted, "Mother [Leonor] played guitar, I played violin, one of my sisters [María] the mandolin, a brother played the triangle, and father [Francisco] played tambourine. So we got up a musical group, and then we dedicated our lives to music on a full-time basis. We started off all over the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and later on we got as far as Detroit, Michigan, always with our music."[16]

They played before a huge audience at the station. Before the graying Cantú knew it, the show included dancing as well as music. Then the comedian Tin-Tan appeared. Other stars appeared in the radio show, Delia Gutiérrez Piñeda, Eugenio Gutiérrez and the young Rubén Vela.[17] The windows at Cantú's studio were wide open during the summer afternoons and the music blasted down the streets.

With rage, pride and unconquerable stubbornness, Cantú stood as a symbol of reliance to *la gente humilde.*[18] He succeeded in attracting local talent from this working-class segment of the community. He gave all kinds of Hispanics opportunity. Traditional Texas stations were hardly entrepreneurial with respect to Chicano and Mexican audiences. Conservative and prejudiced, they disapproved of Cantú's show. A majority of radio stations dismissed this minority music since it was "never an important slice of the market," wrote David Halberstam in *The Fifties.* "Recorded music, in fact, until the fifties bore the label of class. People from the upper middle-class and upper class had the money for phonographs which they listened to classical and high pop, the crooners and the big bands . . . Technology was democratizing the business of music—phonographs and records alike were becoming much cheaper. It was only a matter of time before the artists began to cross over on the traditionally racially segregated charts."[19]

Cantú maintained a magnificent down-to-earth sense of humor, and remained intensely interested in people, particularly his fellow *tejanos,* who often lived a marginal existence. To him every individual, without exception, was a story. The sleek modern, white walls and rounded corners of the KBOR studio radiated with his enthusiasm.[20]

Known for his theatrical touches, Cantú created indelible portraits of politicians who were the oppressors. As he used to say, "There are still feelings of superiority of one people over another. A class distinction prevails here like in exotic India. Still our people have a great tenacity and will survive. Of course they have fear like any one else. I know. I shared it with them. Like a great people anywhere, they are slow to anger. Their courage and their dignity is beyond question."[21]

Cantú had a variety of guest speakers. One of his favorites was the charismatic Francisca Reyes Esparza. She was interested in the land-grant question. After studying the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that concluded the Mexican-American War in 1848, she was convinced that most Tejanos lost their land through fraud and questionable real-estate contracts.

To question and confront these issues, she formed *Asociación de Reclamantes* [The Association of Land Grant Claimants] in May 1925. What drew her together with Cantú was the plight of Hispanic society in the United States.[22]

Cantú at the microphone. "My microphone is their (the *tejanos*) voice. God please give me courage and wisdom to make it a success," he told his wife, Chucha.

At first, Cantú avoided major political involvements. But after having Esparza on the program, he decided to invite other well-known local Hispanics to give the show more variety. He decided to invite Esparza's cousin, Judge J. [José] T. [Tomás] Canales. The unassuming judge, long a champion of civil rights, appeared fragile. At first the bespectacled and soft-spoken Canales came across as staid and humorless.

Cantú knew that Canales had been an advocate of reforming the Texas Rangers. Trying to make small talk, he decided to open the interview with his recollections of what the Rangers did in the vicinity of San Benito. As Cantú spoke, Canales sat by him completely expressionless, as if his body were frozen. Then Canales slowly revealed how the legal system in Texas was abused. He went into details of how the Rangers were hired by local community leaders like Harlingen's trend-setter Lon C. Hill, and Raymond's William Harding to commit atrocities.

Cantú tried at first to keep the interview superficial and pleasant. Canales detected it, and he quickly said, "If you are afraid that you and the station are going to get sued by my statements, please do not worry. I will be glad to present evidence to support my statements and I will bear all court costs."[23]

Cantú laughed nervously, not knowing how to respond. But Canales said, "The problem that most of these unpleasant facts are ignored is because tejano people have been living in fear for so long that it follows them like their shadow."[24]

Audiences loved Francisca Esparza's honesty. She had an earthy common sense, was a bit reckless, and possessed an irreverent, iconoclastic personality. She was an independent woman, and some people felt threatened by her.

Francisca Esparza recalled that Cantú never talked with his guests about political theories, ideas, "or heavy intellectual topics." Instead, he dwelled on facts, people, things and daily human conflict.[25]

Cantú was at first embarrassed about the speakers' exposés, afraid of the negative publicity they might bring. But as he said, "I guess we are recording a human story that needs to be told." Minor Wilson told him, "You'll get used to it."[26]

As time passed, Cantú begin to lampoon politicians and unscrupulous businessmen. He became the conscience of a region that had little concern for civil rights, and which was indifferent to corruption. His was a unique voice, expressing the anger of his people, who were victims of a cruel political and economic inheritance.

The powerful lived in stately manors in splendid tree-lined neighborhoods, or had country homes with huge acreage, Cantú told his listeners. Then he talked about the malnutrition and poverty of the region. The wealthy protected their homes behind towering compound walls or were heavily guarded by private and state security, their driveways packed with the latest sedans or sport cars. He noted that their children attended the most costly, prestigious private schools.[27]

Cantú explained that while most people remained impoverished, Mexico and South Texas had, for decades, remained indifferent to investigations by the political opposition. "There had been no real political opposition. There is only a code of silence surrounding money and power of a selected few."[28]

To the common Mexican, the newscaster Cantú remained a hero. Every week, he graciously presented their point of view to the world. They were appreciative.

In the summer of 1947 Cantú recruited Judge Canales and others to examine consumer fraud and city hall graft in numerous towns. They aroused strong passions and created powerful enemies.

With the aid of Esparza, Canales and other members of the Asociación, Cantú became the Hispanic spokesmen of South Texas. He told the public that it was discrimination and lack of economic opportunity that threatened Texas, not Communism. Esparza recalled, "He acknowledged the raw nerves his speeches touched. He refused to get into name-calling themes. He explained that he was already controversial enough with his negative images of corruption. The last thing he wanted was to be repugnant and malicious."[29]

When a McAllen merchant came to complain about "hook-nosed" Jews, Esparza was there. Cantú said that such remarks only created more hostility and nothing would be solved with demeaning or hateful remarks. "Justice belongs to all, not to a selected few. The conflict here in Texas is that justice is a commodity for those who are in power, especially for those who have the wealth," Esparza remembers him saying.[30]

Esparza and Cantú talked on the radio series about how Mexican farm workers, the "wetbacks," were abused. In the late 1940s, over a hundred thousand illegal Mexican workers were still needed in Texas as cheap labor to fulfill the demands of agricultural barons.[31]

Farmers detested the show and refused to be interviewed on the program. As Bruce Meador wrote:

"They feel, rightly or wrongly, that their very existence might depend on their opportunity to pay low wages." According to one researcher at the time, a common attitude of some farmers was "I hate like the very devil to see these wetbacks live like they do, but I've got a family to feed and a debt to pay . . ."[32]

On his radio broadcasts, Cantú criticized the agricultural industry for its hypocrisy, and anti-labor practices. The growers, who resented the criticism, put pressure on Minor Wilson to kill the broadcast. It came mostly from men like the prominent New York shipper and distributor F.H. Vahlsing.

Wilson realized that Vahlsing could be fierce and vindictive. Vahlsing had climbed to dizzying business heights, and was determined to intimidate Wilson or blacklist his radio station.[33]

Vahlsing informed Wilson that he had a regional headquarters and a packing house in Weslaco and in Elsa, not far from Brownsville. It had "the capacity for packing a [freight] car of vegetables every 12 minutes." Vahlsing had established his business in 1928 in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and "now owns and operates thousands of acres of rich Valley land and has staggering payrolls for his vegetable and fruit packing plants during the season."[34]

Now Vahlsing informed Wilson and others, recalled journalist Joe Oliveira, that "the radical, loudmouth" Cantú had nothing to offer to the valley. As he said, "He is defending Mexicans that could be easily replaced and that are not worth a damn."[35]

Cantú replied by telling his listeners to look at the regional public relations and commerce year book (for 1944). "His advertisements show Mexicans picking his vegetables on their knees. Let us hear from Vahlsing how much he pays them, what working requirements he provides for them and how much profit he makes from his business operations. Here is a classic example of abusive labor conditions."[36]

Feeling the edge of Vahlsing's anger, a nervous Wilson went to Cantú to have him cool it. An argument erupted. Cantú shouted that if he remained silent "it would encourage further labor abuses, and more of an environment of decadence and escapism on behalf of the growers, the citrus associations, canneries and packing companies. Somehow the realities of the law escaped them. It was the most serious difference ever between the two men," said Joe Oliveira.[37]

An angry Cantú criticized other radio stations "for dissipating their forceful vehicle of communication on trivia and ignoring the interests of the public. Radio can help us become knowledgeable. Now there is another strange box with different wires and lights called television that people can see images in. Picture what it can do to increase news, culture and musical programs."[38] By the fall of 1947, Cantú also criticized other broadcasters for lacking objectivity, and failing to provide serious reporting.

Cantú talked about how "the bulk of the Valley's $135 million agricultural income is derived from 11 million citrus trees now in bearing."[39] He explained that the citrus industry, such as Edinburg's Texas Citrus and Tomatoe Company, depended on the Mexican's deplorable working conditions. Then he described how Weslaco, the "Capital City of Citrus," consisted mostly of poverty-stricken Mexicans working for the growers.

Known as the "Fiery Radio Warrior," Cantú did an exposé on the Lower Rio Grande Valley canneries. He revealed how hundreds of canneries and packing companies hired men and women, mostly Mexicans, who were given few benefits. They labored long, tedious hours canning and packing citrus fruits, tomatoes, cut green beans, blackeye peas and other vegetables for low pay. The working environment was dangerous, and unsanitary conditions prevailed. Protective legislation was ignored. Cantú stated that canneries like Elsa Canning Co., Edinburg's Reagan's Fruit and Canning Co., Donna's Knapp-Sherrill Co., Raymondville's Delta Canning Co., and many others were guilty of these abuses.

Then Cantú pointed out the issue of insecticides and how undocumented workers were exposed to them. He then stated the Lower Rio Grande Valley was known as the "Land of Promise" or the "Magic Valley with its golden fruit, flowers and sunshine." But then he asked, "To whom?"[40]

By the spring of 1948 the Sunday afternoon presentation was extended from 2:30 to 4:00 P.M. It became a major performance. "José Cantú had a real instinct as a radio star," said Wilson. The staff was really stimulated and encouraged by him. "He was excited about the show. It was very important to him."[41]

When Cantú exclaimed on the air: "Jesusita, keep the pots warm! I will be there soon for supper," the radio crew took this as a hint to conclude the show and close the studio for the night. When Cantú needed a coffee break, he called his assistant, Ramon Flores, "*Ramoncito, me estás oyendo? Trame café y gotas para los ojos.*" ["Little Ramón, are you hearing me? Bring me some coffee and the eye drops." The hint to remove a singer or a guest speaker from the stage was "*Ramoncito, tu te encargas del programa del Carnation.*" ["Little Ramón, you take care of this sponsored Carnation Dairy Products program"].[42] Cantú's famous radio trademark was "*¿Me estás oyendo, Chucha?,*" [Are you hearing me, Chucha?].[43]

Again and again, during 1950, Cantú said that the Mexican peso and the dollar were united like a marriage. He declared that "we have to get away from old ways of thinking about foreign policy. It is no longer possible to distinguish domestic concerns from foreign affairs. We are rapidly becoming integrated into a one world economic system. In time national and international governments will be one."[44]

As before, Cantú expounded that "We have to drop the Cold War mentality and meet its challenges and stop turning inward. The Cold War is nothing but a product of fear that is demolishing our personal security and moral peace of mind. Instead of pouring all that money into the military, we could pour it into our health and educational system."[45]

Following the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, Cantú declared that American minorities ended up in the battle front and were the first to be denied civil rights by the country they were fighting for.

Also there was the Mexican migration problem. During World War II the U.S. welcomed Mexican workers to relieve a shortage of manpower. Then in 1949 an economic recession created resentment against these same migrants; brutal abuses were committed upon these foreigners while the Mexican government ignored their plight. Now the Korean War created an availability of jobs and renewed the flow of undocumented Mexicans into Texas. As Cantú said, "When nobody needs them they are considered hazardous, malicious and traitorous. Now they are in demand by the farmers . . . To please them [the farmers], the border patrol looks the other way."[46]

Between the musical talent and exposés, Cantú's show became a major success throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Suddenly these kind of interviews were in demand, and listeners could not get enough of them.

Another service of Cantú's program was a customer satisfaction segment having to do with local merchants and products. If someone had paid too much for a product, or the product did not do what it was supposed to do, live up to its advertisement, or in any way was misrepresented, Cantú would fight for the customer over the air. This portion of the program was known as the "Cantú Can Do" series.[47]

At first sponsors like Carnation, Royal Crown Hair Products and wealthy businesswoman Esther Ruenes, who owned movie theaters, were nervous about the controversial interviews and some of the "Cantú Can Do" episodes.[48] But the publicity for their businesses was outstanding and now these

advertisers wanted to be identified with "Cantú's crusades for justice." In time his name or image on a product was a guarantee of continuous sales and excellence.[49]

The cautious Wilson was steeped in the values of business. He needed to be in control. Although he fretted about the cost of the production, he saw in Cantú a good business prospect. Whether Cantú envisioned the program as a series of talent shows, interviews, and ideas, Wilson seized upon the concepts.

Newspaper critics ignored the show. They were unwilling to give adequate credit to Cantú for fear of political reprisals. Before his death there was some lukewarm praise.

Regardless of his objections to airing political themes and social conflicts on KBOR, Wilson needed Cantú, and it furthered their friendship. As for Cantú, it put him on the side of his people, so often condemned in Texas because of their skin color, religion and culture.[50]

Then the gracious, prudent, and proper Esther Ruenes decided to take part in Cantú's show. Obsessed with perfection, she had a frosty, yet amiable personality that compelled men instinctively to straighten their ties in her presence. In the summer of 1950, she came to complain about some Hispanic radicals who had been guest speakers on the show. These included the famous Mexican labor leader, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and his associate, Manuel Villaseñor. She had also come to promote a new facial cream product.[51]

Cantú once declared, "The Lower Río Grande region has soaked up more blood, sweat, and tears of our people than any other part of the country . . . this land with its rich soil is sacred. It nourishes us, it gives us vitality and a tenacity to survive." Joe Oliveira, a local journalist, recorded these comments.

Cantú thought that once she started criticizing his show it was going to be one of the most humiliating moments in his life. But before she opened her mouth, the Mexican actor Pedro Infante appeared on the stage and sang to the audience. The Mexican movie studios forced the annoyed actor and singer to

go to the Lower Rio Grande region to promote himself and the Mexican cinema. When he saw Ruenes next to Cantú, Infante was impressed by her beauty, and sat next to her after performing.

When Cantú interviewed her, the stylish Ruenes was so overwhelmed that she forgot why she was there. Cantú then reminded her that she had said something earlier about radical Hispanics. Never flirtatious, Ruenes remained speechless while seeing the actor Infante. Then, regaining her composure, she managed to talk about Infante's movies. Cantú interviewed Infante, and several musicians played later. After the show, Ruenes and Infante went out to dinner. She remained a steady sponsor of Cantú's radio program.[52]

Minor Wilson was pleased. KBOR was now as lucrative as it was prestigious. Camel cigarettes and the Pearl Beer Company bought several spots. Each wanted the privilege of being the first advertised. Wilson became the most ardent booster of the show. He was delighted that Cantú was paying for himself with sponsored broadcasts. He hired extra talent scouts and other staff to make certain that Cantú's show would continue to flourish.[53]

Cantú had a sixth sense about keeping his show a success. In news and entertainment, he cared about excellence and about his image. He had the patience for slow, hard, serious work in gathering facts and getting talented people to come again and again to his program. The work absorbed his time and energy, but he retained his passion for what he believed in.

At the peak of his fame, Cantú suffered from insomnia. He drank coffee from morning until night. "A lot of anger was within him that he could not reveal," a friend recalled. For one reason or another, he was never close to individuals. It embarrassed him to show distress or express gloom. He was cautious to never appear awkward. His descriptive powers and his flair radiated confidence.[54]

Only Chucha understood him. When Cantú came from work after a long day into their simple, light green frame house with its white trim and attractive porch, she saw the Cantú that no one else knew. She regularly listened to his gripes, weathered his sullen and sulky moods, and made certain that his shirts were well-ironed, his suits well-pressed. Chucha knew that her husband represented the tejano community. Some members of which saw Cantú as a hero.[55]

Babies were named after him. Politicians would never directly confront him. When they needed votes, Cantú's name was an asset. Pearl Beer, and his major sponsor, Carnation Diary Products, used his image to promote business. They also used his witty sayings in their Spanish language advertisements.[56] When Cantú spoke for charities and civic organizations, he had just the right touch.

Cantú realized that his glamorous job was in fact a task of long hours that could easily breed ulcers and heart attacks. This alluring position had great rewards and ugly pitfalls. His radio production remained so popular that it devoured his privacy. Chucha remembered those days well. "The never-ending stress of the show was eating him up. It complicated our lives as a couple, creating a few domestic battles that ended up with smashed furniture and broken dishes."[57]

In one of his last broadcasts, Cantú said Mexico and Texas forgot what democracy meant. "No individual or group has a monopoly on truth, honesty and rationality. Only God has that privilege. The rest of us are trying to follow His teachings. It requires wisdom and discipline to do that. In the world of business and politics, you need all the wisdom and discipline you can get," Canales and Esparza remember him saying.[58]

Judge Canales and others warned him that his enemies were complaining to Wilson, now senior manager of KBOR, seeking to ban him from radio work. Cantú persisted to denounce those "who exploit the community." During this period, when Senator Joseph McCarthy was creating a national hysteria

about "the Red menace," political pressure took an uglier turn. Cantú now was accused of communist leanings by conservative groups in Texas.

"Cantú appeared as a dangerous radical who had secret connections with Moscow. There were vicious rumors that he communicated with Moscow in a secret room in his studio that had all kinds of fancy electronic equipment," said longtime friend Herman Montemayor.[59]

Cantú's critics prompted numerous letters of complaints to Cantú's sponsors. Carnation Dairy Products told Cantú to keep his show only as a musical program. Minor Wilson held his ground, refusing to cancel Cantú's show. Meanwhile, Cantú managed to win new sponsors. The fact that Cantú's program retained high ratings helped his crusade tremendously.

Cantú remained a symbol of radicalism. Of that era, historian David Montejano has pointed out that "McCarthyism, in fact, swept Texas with the fervor of a religious revival."[60]

Scene of the fatal accident. June 7, 1952.

On June 7, 1952, Cantú was coming home from a broadcaster's seminar in Port Isabel. At the conference, the participants were excited to learn about a new technological breakthrough that could create small transistorized radios for $25 to $50. Before this time people had to buy bulky, expensive home sets to enjoy radio programs. This invention would guarantee a wider Hispanic audience, and Cantú was excited about the possibilities.

He was also on the verge of playing a role in television. In terms of commercial opportunity, as America soon found out, radio was nothing compared to this new medium. Cantú had plans to expose the brutal labor conditions in South Texas. As Francisca Esparza explained, "Unlike most people, José Cantú understood its true power. As a brilliant man, he had a workable moral compass and understood what his people needed. After all, he himself was one of those hardworking salt-of-the-earth kinsmen."[61]

On that June day, Cantú was speeding down the Boca Chica route toward Brownsville when his brakes failed. Trying to keep control of the car, he crashed into a huge mesquite tree near a creek. He was killed instantly. The front of his four-door Plymouth was totally crushed against the tree, the hood of the vehicle snapped and bent.

A farmer nearby heard the wreck. He dashed to the scene and recognized the body. Later an ambulance came and several newspaper reporters rushed to the place. A report was issued in August 1952 by a Cameron County investigation bureau that his car's brakes were tempered with. Many believed this to be a fact.[62]

On June 11, Brownsville was overwhelmed by Cantú's funeral. People came from all over Mexico and Texas. In the dusty, breathless heat, thousands of mourners converged on downtown Brownsville to attend the funeral in the magnificent Immaculate Conception Church. Crowds were standing outside the front of the church, blocking the streets.[63] Labor unions stood with their banners of Benito Juárez. The "*Legión Mexicana*" furnished hundreds of baskets and wreaths of flowers. From the hand-carved, ebony wood pulpit, a priest eulogized Cantú and his dedication to the community.

Later a procession of silent mourners went to the cemetery. Chucha was touched by the size of the crowd. Her head covered with a dark lace veil, Chucha, dressed in black, walked behind the pallbearers, who were periodically stretching their sore fingers. They set the heavy metal casket slowly down in the grave. Esparza delivered an elaborate eulogy during the funeral.[64]

Afterwards, local J.C. Penny stores sold dresses, ladies' sweaters and men's shirts with Cantú's picture and name. Carnation Dairy Products put a colorful label on cans of their new chocolate milk. showing a saintly, smiling Cantú drinking it. On the back side of the can it stated, "Face the day with your morning chocolate treat with Cantú's blessings."[65]

Minor Wilson decided to sell numerous post cards, booklets and other souvenirs. Brownsville's Springman King Printing Co., published them. One of the most popular postcards showed Cantú dressed as a dashing Mexican *charro* with a lavish hat. Wilson told the public it was for Cantú's family, especially for his daughter, Minerva, who still suffered from cancer. She later died at the age of thirty four.

An angry Chucha realized that business firms like Wilson's radio station, and Springman King Printing Co. had no intention of giving her a cent and sued them. Although she never received any money, she managed to stop the sale of the souvenirs and other merchandise. Later, a *corrido* [epic song] was composed about Cantú and records were going to be made. A lawsuit put an end to that scheme, too.[66]

Chucha remained cautious, since she had been a victim of schemes to promote her husband's memory. She managed to reconstruct her life in Brownsville, and cherished the personal articles she had of her husband's. She refused to marry again. Even years later, every month she brought fresh flowers to his grave.

The memory of José Cantú lived on. Where he crashed against the mesquite tree became a spontaneous shrine. Candles and letters marked the spot. Mourners came to pray and fast by a huge spray of flowers. Candles burned to their stubs and an admirer nailed a small white cross to the tree. One sign was posted in Spanish, "May Justice Be Done." Another sign stated, "We love you."[67]

Throughout the years, wreaths and crude white crosses remained at the site. Photos of José Cantú were posted on the tree with a simple flower garden bordered with stones. Many felt a need to go there, saying that the site had a powerful, enduring quality.

"It was very emotional for me. I got angry again. It was almost like going through all the grieving again for this wonderful man. Then by the time I left, I felt very peaceful," declared Felicitas Rodriguez.[68]

Ermilo Montemayor, who remained a friend of Cantú to the end, remarked, "When I first came to the mesquite tree, I stood by it. After a long hour of mediation, I've had a change of heart about many things in life."[69]

Herminia Méndez also said, "If you kneel or stand by the Mesquite tree long enough, you can feel José Cantú's presence. The tree glows with love and peace."[70]

People came to leave personal mementos—a rosary, a child's shoe, a sweater, car keys, a high school diploma, a marriage certificate. There was talk about building a chapel by the tree. At one time Cameron County officials contemplated chopping the tree down with the intention of healing the wounds left by bitter racial politics.

Clara Zepeda said, "The shrine persisted. When the people held on to the shrine it became an indication of unresolved grief. It was an important sign that something was wrong. Eventually it slowly fell into disrepair."[71]

José Cantú became the patron saint of civil rights along the Lower Rio Grande. As Américo Paredes noted, "José Cantú was an early activist; of that there can be no doubt. He used his radio programs to attack political corruption and to aid the needy until death silenced him."[72]

Others tried to copy José Cantú's style, but no one could capture that magic. People wrote to stations asking them to find another talent like Cantú. Many radio stars came and went. But no one could hold the interest of an audience like Cantú. As Paredes said, "Cantú was one of those rare legendary figures who was as good as his myth."[73]

NOTES

Getting biographical data about José Rangel Cantú has taken me years of gathering bits of information on him. For a long time, it was just a curiosity—saving details and anecdotes in my files. One of the most useful items is Album en Memoria de José Cantú *(Brownsville, Texas: Springman King Co., 1952. [It has no page numbers] As it says "José Cantú, a travese de la KBOR llevaba la felicidad y la esperanza a millares de radio escuchas." It is an illustrated history of his career, the auto accident and his funeral.*

There were individuals who helped me on this project. They made it possible to get behind the myth that surrounded Cantú. I conducted numerous interviews. A few of them requested anonymity. All of their insights and memories were valuable.

I would like to thank one individual in particular, Cantú's wife, María de Jesús Solis Cantú, known as Jesusita or Chucha. I managed to tape some of the interview. She endured endless questions that opened up painful memories. Her recollections gave me valuable insights into Cantú. Also I owe a special thanks to Herman and Ermilo Montemayor, who are brothers from San Benito.

[1] The "Programa Popular was known for its *"Chismes, Comentarios y Chistes. A . . . Y Musica . . ."* This is the slogan that appeared on José Cantú's business card.

[2] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, April 20, 1978.

[3] Interview with Minor Wilson, summer, 1961.

[4] Interview with Felicitas Rodriguez, summer 1962.

[5] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, April 20, 1978.

[6] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, April 11, 1978.

[7] Born on November 27, 1900, Primitivo Méndez died on March 12, 1947. Regardless of his death certificate, people suspected that he was murdered for exposing some corrupt law enforcement practices in the San Benito Police Department. Interview with his wife, Herminia Méndez, June 18, 1976.

[8] Interview with Herminia Méndez, June 18, 1976. As of interest, see the advertisement in *The Year Book of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Northern Mexico: 1948 Yearbook*, p 73.

[9] Quoted in H. Gorden and John H. Jenkins, *"I' Frank Hamer" The Life of a Texas Peace Officer* (Austin, Texas: The Pemberton Press, 1968), p 59.

[10] Miriam Chatelle, *For We Love Our Valley Home* (San Antonio, Texas: The Naylor Company, 1948), pp 30-31. She was a witness to the deeds of Henry, Mace and Hamer. She shared her reflections with José Canales. They used to see each other in the 1950's when she spoke to local historical organizations. She was also active in the San Benito Public Library

[11] Interview with José Canales, May 24, 1962.

[12] Interview with Ermilo Montemayor, April 16, 1978.

[13] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, April 11, 1978. To the end of her life she lived in Brownsville. Interview with Felicitas Rodriguez, summer, 1962. When she heard that Cantú was killed, she gathered a collection in San Benito for funeral expenses. Her name appeared in contributors list of *Album en Memoria de José Cantú.*

[14] Interview with Minor Wilson, summer, 1961.

[15] Interview with Herman Montemayor, April 14, 1978. He attended numerous Cantú's shows.

[16] Lydia Mendoza, "The Lark of the Border," in U.S. Government Document, Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, *Ethnic Recordings in America: A Neglected Heritage* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), pp 119-120. See also p 107. For more on Mendoza see also in this citation, James. S. Griffith, "Lydia Mendoza: An Enduring Mexican-American Singer," pp 103-104.

[17] For more on these individuals see Manuel H. Pena, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History Of A Working-Class Music* (Austin: University of Texas, 1985), pp 142-143.

[18] Most Hispanic working people were cannery workers and field workers, mainly cotton pickers. Also numerous Anglos supported themselves the same way. One of them was Luther Evans, who became a prominent scholar and the 10th U.S. Librarian of Congress, 1945-1953. See William J. Sittig, "Luther Evans: Man for a New Age," in U.S. Government Document, Library of Congress, *Librarians of Congress: 1802-1974* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), p 223.

[19] David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), pp 471-472.

[20] Interview with Herman Montemayor, April 14, 1978.

[21] Interview with José Canales, May 12, 1962.

[22] For a sample of the activities of the *Asociación* see the *Corpus Christi Times,*[Corpus Christi, Texas] April 6, 1945; June 7, 1946; *South Texas Citizen* [Laredo, Texas], April 6, 1945 and *El Norte* (Monterrey, Nuevo Leon), May 10, 1954.

[23] Interview with José Canales, May 12, 1962.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Interview with Francisca Reyes Esparza, August 24, 1972.

[26] Interview with Minor Wilson, summer, 1961.

[27] Cantú criticism is still valid. See Mark Fineman, "Zedillo Breaks Down Mexico's Code of Silence," *Los Angeles Times,* March 8, 1995, p A 9.

[28] Interview with Américo Paredes, April 12, 1977.

[29] Interview with Francisca Reyes Esparza, August 23, 1972.

[30] Interview with Francisca Reyes Esparza, August 23, 1972.

[31] In 1948, the National Farm Labor Union of the American Federation of Labor, during a conference Francisca Reyes Esparza attended, discussed the problem in terms of at least 200,000 whom they believed to be illegally in Texas. See

Bruce S. Meador, "Wetback Labor in the Lower Rio Grande Valley," M.A. Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1951, p 5.

[32] Meador, p 15.

[33] Interview with José Canales, May 12, 1962.

[34] Edited by Mabel Collier Epright and Gladys Collier Hooper, *The Year Book of the Lower Valley of Texas and Northern Mexico: 1944 Year Book* (Mission, Texas: *The Mission Times*), pp 24-25. These issues were published yearly from about 1937 to about 1955 to promote business in the Lower Rio Grande. They were sponsored by "advertisers, chambers of commerce, service clubs and the many individuals who have contributed so generously to its success." Unfortunately not many survived, and few libraries bothered to keep them.

During the fall, they were sold in local drug stores and in a few curio shops. They are now a great source of data to the scholar who needs to understand the historical background of the Lower Rio Grande's economy.

Vahlsing told everyone that "each succeeding year, that he increased his investments in the Rio Grande Valley and there can be no greater proof of the future of the industry in this section than Vahlsing's constant progress."

[35] Interview with Joe Oliveira, May 12, 1962.

[36] Interview with Joe Oliveira, May 12, 1962.

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] Cantú's figures came from *The Year Book of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Northern Mexico: 1948 Yearbook*, p 21.

[40] Interview with José Canales, May 12, 1962.

[41] Interview with Minor Wilson, summer 1961.

[42] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, April 11, 1978. See also James Marshall, *Elbridge A. Stuart: Founder of Carnation Company* (Los Angeles: Carnation Company, 1958), p 174. Carnation wanted cordial relations with Hispanics since "In 1931, the Henry and Bothell creameries in Los Angeles, California, were added, and Carnation now was in its new business almost from Canada to Mexico in the West."

[43] Letter of Américo Paredes to the author, May 18, 1978.

[44] Interview with Joe Oliveira, May 12, 1962. For several years, he was a journalist for the *Brownsville Herald.* He wrote numerous articles. His favorite articles were historical topics, such as "General Juan Cortina Continues to Baffle Historians: Was He Bandit or Patriot,?" *Brownsville Herald, December 31, 1950.*

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Interview with Herman Montemayor, April 16, 1978.

[48] Esther R. Ruenes (June 1, 1893- September 25, 1976) had a talent for making money. She lived in San Benito and there opened her first movie theater. The successful Ruenes eventually expanded to other parts of the Lower Rio Grande with her movie business.

[49] I have a Royal Crown Hair Dressing postcard advertisement with Cantú's photo that was given away as a souvenir. It has a quote from Cantú, *"Con todo aprecio, José Cantú"* or *"Con todo cariño, José Cantú."* Also on this advertisement it stated, *"Con este retrato se paran los pelos depunta, pero con la brilliantia (de Royal Crown) se le bajan y solo cuesta l0 y 25 @. Su Amigo Gracias José Cantú."*

[50] Interview with Esther Ruenes,, August 14, 1970.

[51] Interview with Herman Montemayor, April 16, 1978. See Robert Paul Millon, *Mexican Marxist: Vicente Lomardo Toledano* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. 52, 61. Toledano remained active as a labor organizer in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, especially in the sugar industry in Ciudad Mante.

[52] Interview with Esther Ruenes, August 14, 1970.

[53] Interview with Herman Montemayor, April 16, 1978.

[54] Interview with Ermilo Montemayor, April 16, 1978. He used to know Cantú well.

[55] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, April 11, 1978.

[56] Some of Cantú's sayings would start with *"¡Fíjate . . . que suave!"* and *"Tu que tienes las orejas por los lados . . ."*

[57] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, August 20, 1972.

[58] Interview with José Canales and Francisca Reyes Esparza, May 24, 1962.

[59] Interview with Herman Montemayor, April 16, 1978.

[60] David Montejano, *Anglos And Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1987), p 275.

[61] Interview with Francisca Reyes Esparza, August 23, 1972.

[62] Interview with Herman Montemayor, April 16, 1978; interview with José Canales, May 12, 1962.

[63] *Brownsville Herald*, June 11, 1952.

[64] In the *Album en Memoria de José Cantú*, the section on "La Tragica Muerte de José Cantú" stated that in Brownsville "El Panteon Antiguo vio el mas grande funeral de su historia."

[65] The product has a free backpack offer. The durable and water resistant red or blue plastic backpack had a picture of Cantú. It included padded, adjustable straps and a zippered top closure.

[66] Interview with María de Jesús Solis Cantú, April 11, 1978.

[67] Interview with Clara Zepeda, February 15, 1995.

[68] Interview with Felicitas Rodriguez, summer, 1962.

[69] Interview with Ermilo Montemayor, April 16, 1978.

[70] Interview with Herminia Méndez, June 18, 1976.

[71] Interview with Clara Zepeda, February 15, 1995. That day we went to see where Cantú crashed against the Mesquite tree. It is still standing by the road.

[72] Letter of Américo Paredes to the author, May 18, 1978. He wrote, "I counted José Cantú among my friends. The last time I saw him was in 1948 when I was briefly in Brownsville on leave from an editorial job I held in Tokyo, Japan, at that time."

[73] Interview with Américo Paredes, April 12, 1977.

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