

# MIDWESTERN MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR GENDER EQUALITY: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW, 1920s-1960s<sup>1</sup>

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## *Introduction*

In recent years, numerous scholarly publications have dealt with the 20th-century origins of the Mexican American civil rights movement. In particular, there has been a growing interest among researchers in the generations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who took the lead in demanding social and political equality for themselves and their children between the period of the 1920s and the early 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Until the recent spate of studies, the common view of this historical period was that the Mexican leadership generally sought cultural assimilation in the United States, and political accommodation with the larger society.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, this has been the view of Chicano activists who came of age during the late 1960s and 1970s. Typically, such contemporary activists have pointed at the organizations put together by earlier generations—groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the G.I. Forum, the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations, and the “Viva Kennedy” Clubs—and argued that these groups were overly eager to compromise on issues where they should have stood firm.

Recent research reveals, however, that the Mexican and Mexican American leadership during the Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War period made a tremendous contribution to the struggle for social, political and economic equality.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, far from being strictly accommodationist and eager for assimilation, most Mexican people fought hard—often within a hostile social environment and against fierce political and economic discrimination—to maintain their culture and their values.

To carry out this fight and accomplish their goals, these Mexican and Mexican American generations established a multitude of organizations which represented a broad spectrum of groups, interests, strategies, and ideologies; when it came to organizing to carry on the struggle, these people were able to go far in achieving their goals.

The Mexican and Mexican American generations of World War I, the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War often lived with blatant discrimination, despite their willingness to learn English and their determined efforts to bridge the gap between Mexican and American cultures. Because of their resistance to discrimination, and because they organized so well to protect their culture and their claims to justice, the people of these particular generations made it possible for their children and grandchildren to secure unprecedented social and political rights.

Many of the women and men, for example, of the World War II generation were solid and capable leaders, and they established the organizational environment for Mexican American advancement. That progressive framework has survived to the present day, and has made it possible for subsequent generations to continue expanding the boundaries of their rights and privileges as Americans and as Mexican Americans.

Most of the scholarly research focusing on Mexicans and Mexican Americans during this period from the 1920s to the early 1960s, however, has typically centered on the Southwest region, and has been interpreted largely from a male perspective.<sup>5</sup> All of this is beginning to change, however, as recent studies have looked at Mexican American communities in both the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest regions.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, researchers have begun to focus on gender politics and the significant roles and contributions of women during this critical period when Mexican Americans were rapidly developing their political consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to these recent studies, we can now see more clearly the social, cultural, and political contributions of Mexican and Mexican American women in the 1920s and 1930s, the important roles they played during World War II and the subsequent conflict in Korea, and how and why Mexican communities in the United States underwent fundamental social changes during the 1940s and '50s; *to no small extent* because women were able to take on greater responsibilities as heads of households, wage earners, and community leaders.

During the past 10 years, I have interviewed over 150 Midwestern women, representing over 100 different communities, who were actively involved in the fight for Mexican and Mexican American rights during the 1920s and early 1960s. This article presents what I have found out from these interviews. The first part of the article is an overview of the push and pull factors that brought Mexicans into the Midwest in the first place. This section also covers the emergence of distinct Mexican communities in the Midwest, and the haunting prejudice and systemic discrimination which Mexicans encountered in the early years. This first part of the article is critical because it provides the historical backdrop of why Mexican women and men found it important to organize in the Midwest so long ago.

The second part of the article surveys the diverse roles and immeasurable contributions of Mexican women prior to World War II in all aspects of community life. It will be shown that women were extremely active in the development of the Mexican *colonias* in this region. They organized religious activities, youth and senior-citizen groups, and associations dedicated to challenging discrimination, promoting the communities' political and economic interests, and preserving their ancestral cultures.

Mexican women also participated in sports and the fine arts. These two activities enhanced their public self-expression, individual self-worth, and abilities at team work. Participation in the fine arts and sports, for example, were closely linked to the overall political agenda of women in promoting gender equality in all communal experiences. As a result of their valuable contributions to the entire community prior to World War II, these Mexican women became powerful role models and mentors for later generations of Mexican American women in the Midwest.

The third part of this article highlights the inspirational and groundbreaking roles of Mexican American women during World War II. Thousands of Mexican American women worked in Midwestern defense plants during the war, and many more Mexican American women actually served in the armed forces or aided the American war effort by promoting various home-front activities. This is a chapter in the history of Mexican Americans that has been neglected far too long.

The last section tells the story, briefly, of how this post-war generation of women fought for the civil rights of Mexican Americans in the Midwest, and

how they influenced a new generation of women in the late 1960s and 1970s. Undesignedly, World War II helped expedite the civil rights movement of the Mexican American community in general, and women in particular. Mexican American women are generally depicted as the supporting cast of characters for the political aspirations of men during this post-war era. This section dispels this myth by showing that women were equal political partners with men, especially during the critical period of the civil rights movement between the 1940s and 1960s.

Like the rest of this article, this final section is based on the first-hand accounts and the fascinating anecdotes which my interviewees offered during the course of our conversations. In the American Middle West, and across the nation, Mexican American women are now challenging their historical invisibility. I hope to deal here with some small part of their extraordinary story.

### *Historical Background*

Mexican immigration in the Midwest greatly increased during the first thirty years of the 20th century. The factors involved in this migration included the harsh economic and political conditions under the Porfirio Díaz regime, the Mexican Revolution, the expanding North American economy with its promise of economic security, U.S. immigration laws limiting cheap labor from Eastern Europe and Asia, the use of Mexican workers as strikebreakers in some U.S. industries, and the completion of the Mexican railroad network connecting it to the North American rail system.<sup>8</sup> One woman described her family's decision to strike out for the United States:

My parents and relatives left Mexico because of the bloody fighting during the Revolution. Thousands of people were either killed, wounded, captured, or forced to serve on whoever[sic] side controlled the region. They executed young men on the spot because they refused to join them. Our towns and homes were being destroyed by both the federal government and the rebels. Many people decided to leave for the United States seeking safety for themselves and their families.<sup>9</sup>

Thousands of Mexicans went to Texas and settled in refugee camps. These squatter camps provided very little water or food for the newly arriving. The living conditions were terrible, especially for the children. The men were desperate to find work to feed and house their families:

We all tried finding ways to making living[*sic*] bearable. There were many employment recruiters encouraging us to sign contracts for work. We signed the papers because we were desperate and hungry. Some of the men left for months and returned to take us to the Midwest. Some men never came back for their families. A railroad company hired my father and several other men. My father worked with a section crew.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout Texas, there were hundreds of these recruiters, known as *engachadores*, who represented several North American companies eager to sign up men to work in the Middle West. The Texas-Mexico border played host to an elaborate network of “employment agencies” and labor recruiters.<sup>11</sup> A long-time resident of the Midwest talked about this migratory pattern among Mexicans:

The Mexican people who came to Fort Madison, Iowa, were originally from Guanajuato, Mexico. The employment agents in Texas contracted them to jobs in Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico. From Colorado, many continued on to western Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri. Eventually, many settled in Fort Madison. Fort Madison was the springboard for Mexicans to other cities in Iowa such as Burlington, Fairfield, Davenport, and Des Moines.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1920s, Mexican labor was a significant contributing factor to the Midwest economy.<sup>13</sup> Mexican workers were found in dozens of industries, including railroads, agriculture and mining. Mexicans also worked in automobile plants, lumber mills, packing houses, tanneries, sugar refineries, oil refineries, nitrate plants, textile mills, farm and construction equipment plants, paint factories, ice houses, and on the docks of Great Lakes ports.<sup>14</sup>

As a rule, Mexican workers were particularly susceptible to exploitation and misemployment by management. This economic vulnerability was due mainly to language barriers, the ever-present threat of deportation, hostility by labor unions, and the desperate need to take any job in order to support their large families. One man whose father had broken his leg in an industrial accident said the company tried to blame his father for the accident and offered him fifty dollars to settle any claims:

I interpreted for my father during these discussions. My father said in Spanish that he would break the company's lawyer's leg for fifty dollars. I didn't translate that part to the company lawyer. My father took his case to an attorney and eventually won a one-thousand-dollar settlement with the company. Almost half of the settlement went to my father's attorney.<sup>15</sup>

As Mexican workers gradually became a permanent part of the Midwest economy, they cautiously took the first steps toward developing stable communities. The majority, for example, returned either to Texas, Mexico, or the Southwest to find new brides or to prepare established families to follow them to their new homes, and literally thousands of Mexican children were born in the region during the first quarter of the century.

The presence of wives and children dramatically transformed the status of the Mexican community in the Midwest from a transient male population to a full-fledged, multi-generational community of men, women, and children:

Overnight, Mexican communities changed from largely single men to new families. It appeared that every family had several children born in the 1920s. As a result of this growth, the men built additional bedrooms, constructed living room shelves and kitchen cabinets. The wood and building supplies used for our homes came from the discarded materials from the railroads. Baby cradles hung from the ceiling because of the lack of sleeping space inside the boxcars.<sup>16</sup>

The Midwest Mexican population mushroomed during the decade of the 1920s, growing—by one estimate—seven times faster than the Mexican population was growing in the Southwest.<sup>17</sup> By 1930, the Mexican community was the seventh largest ethnic group in the United States, and in Kansas it was second only to the Germans.<sup>18</sup> The principle states for Mexican settlements included Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Ohio.

Mexican communities were concentrated near the industries which provided employment, and people often found the living conditions to be very difficult. People still vividly recount the nerve-racking hardships of sub-standard and overcrowded housing, the lack of running water, the discomforts of outdoor bathrooms, the smell from nearby city dumps, the unpaved and unlighted streets, and the frigid cold during the winter months. Oftentimes, there was no gas service or sewage facilities, and people were charged 50 cents a month for the use of a common water pump:

Cook's Point in Davenport, Iowa, was a barrio that had no modern facilities. We had outhouses, kerosene lamps, wood-burning or kerosene kitchen ranges, coal-burning stoves, and no running water. There were four taps located at several points in the neighborhood where people went for their

water for washing clothes, baths, cooking, and drinking. The streets were all dirt with no lights nor sidewalks.<sup>19</sup>

In many ways, however these unbearable conditions were still an improvement over the conditions of living in Mexico. Mexicans who settled in the Midwest lived in various types of housing, including boxcars, tents, boarding houses, communal housing, bunk housing, cardboard shacks, single-family dwellings, and tenements. The vast majority of these self-enclosed Mexican communities, stretching across the heartland of America, eventually took on distinctly Mexican names. These special names were chosen by the residents for various reasons:

Each Mexican community had its own affectionate name based on either the physical geography, the nature of the housing, or the nearby industry. For example, all of the railroad camps were known as "*La Yarda de Santa Fe*" or "*La Yarda de Burlington*." The cement settlements were named after either the color of the housing or the building materials such as "*La Lata*," "*La Plata*," and the "*yellow shacks*."<sup>20</sup>

A resident of Fort Madison, Iowa, remembers:

In 1921-1922, the first company homes were provided for these railroad workers on company land and provided free of charge with all utilities available. These homes were built at the foot of 35th Street and south of the Burlington Northern Railroad. This barrio was called "*El Estafiate*" after a medical herb that was found in abundance in that area.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Roles and Contributions of Midwest Mexican Women Prior to World War II*

Blatant bigotry did considerable damage to Mexicans both in the workplace and in the general community in the years preceding World War II. Racism and prejudice were disgracefully open and widespread in American society in the first half of this century, and Mexicans confronted the common practice of being restricted to certain segregated sections in restaurants, theaters, schools, housing, parks, and even some Catholic churches. This blatant discrimination—triggered primarily by social intolerance and competition for scarce jobs—limited the social and economic opportunities for thousands of Mexicans who entered the Midwest in this period.

At first, they generally found America to be a cold, distant, and unfeeling place. However, some members of the Mexican community received assistance from sympathetic Anglos acting on their own initiative, and from various charitable organizations.<sup>22</sup> The Social Progressive Movement, which began in the 1920s, was led by social reformers who had developed a network of settlement houses and outreach programs for society's new immigrants. Originally, the primary target for most of these agencies were the European ethnic groups. However, as a result of restrictive immigration in the aftermath of World War I, some of the charities gradually began to reach out to the newly arriving Mexican immigrants. Benefits provided to needy families included food, clothing, furniture, medical assistance, job referrals, eviction and debt counseling, legal support, citizenship information, and marital counseling.

Despite the good intentions of many agencies, the Mexican leadership was extremely suspicious regarding the hidden—and not so hidden—intentions of some organizations. The Mexican community viewed many of these groups as promoters of cultural assimilation, which many Mexicans resisted. The Mexican leadership moved quickly to establish its own organizations for self-governance:

The Mexican community prior to World War II had an elaborate infrastructure of organizations, activities, and services. The community was fiercely independent and developed a strong sense of self-reliance. Every community had several people who had prior organizational experiences. Many of the community organizers, for example, had been active as civic and labor leaders either in Mexico or Texas.<sup>23</sup>

The Mexican community was a vibrant mix of various social groups. There were, for example, many religious, cultural, civic, youth, patriotic, recreational, fraternal, political, and labor associations. Collectively, they challenged economic and social inequality, and resisted the forces of cultural assimilation. In other words, the Mexican leadership in these years successfully established a sense of community solidarity.

Mexican organizations were involved with workers' rights, youth and senior citizen services, protection for the undocumented population, shelter and food for the homeless, economic development, challenging police brutality, promoting voting and citizenship activities, and providing legal assistance to fight unfair housing and business practices.



The cultural values of these newfound groups consisted of the protection of rights and privileges of Mexicans, faith in the future, unity, education, and the virtues of persistence and hard work. There were literally hundreds of Mexican organizations scattered throughout the Midwest by the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, despite their common goals, these groups also reflected a complicated web of special interests based on class, occupation, political ideology, age, religion, education, geography, and gender.

Prior to World War I, the majority of Mexican women worked, for example, as garment workers, hotel maids, child-care workers, and domestics. Other Mexican women worked in small businesses controlled by their families, including boarding houses and restaurants. In spite of the increased number of women by the end of the 1920s, it appears that the Midwest urban *colonias* remained disproportionately male. Yet, despite their small numbers, women were uncommonly involved with the development of numerous organizations and community activities in this region.

Mexican women were visible in both the development and the leadership of several key social organizations. This was especially true regarding their roles within religious groups. Mexican women provided the spiritual texture within the community. Religion provided its Catholic followers, for example, with a familiar and reassuring bond to Mexico, and inspired the faith required to survive and prosper in a hostile environment. Other Mexican women were the backbone of the Methodist and Baptist churches' intensive membership campaigns aimed at these newly arriving Mexican refugees.

Religious mutual-aid associations, often led by women, were involved with assisting priests and ministers during church services, sponsoring religious activities, recruiting new members, providing social services to the needy and sick, working with youth, organizing wakes and rosaries, leading funeral processions, and helping with fundraising.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to numerous church associations, Mexican women established several civic groups which addressed many pressing social issues that were being ignored by the larger society. They provided conscientious assistance to all the people of the community. Women did not shy away from political struggle either. As grim as their future may have seemed, women did not give in entirely to hopelessness and self-pity. They had their families to think of. Mexican women helped mobilize the community, and they were a force to be reckoned with.

Women provided uniform action along with the men to overcome racial animosity against the Mexican people.<sup>25</sup> A longtime leader in the community also stressed that:

Women were active in extraordinary social reforms in the community, including better sanitary conditions and equal education for their children. Mexican women took courageous stands against racism and orchestrated several grass-roots campaigns for better economic and social opportunities for the entire community. Women leaders were uncompromising in their demands for first-class status.<sup>26</sup>

Mexican women's voluntary groups also provided impeccable care to the sick and homeless, supervised burials, translated for those who could not read or speak English, provided volunteers at health clinics and orphanages, helped the elderly, and collected food for the poor. These types of organizations also provided psychological support for newcomers by buffering them from the starkness of a foreign land:

Very few social agencies hired bilingual staff to assist poor Mexican families arriving from Mexico, or to help those who were already here for some time. Mexican women established a network of temporary homes where poor people lived and were fed until we could find them permanent shelter and work. This network of sanctuary was sponsored by churches and civic groups within the Mexican community.<sup>27</sup>

These dedicated Mexican women were, in fact, the first social workers in the community and they filled a crucial void left by the larger society. The courageous mission of these women was aiding the underprivileged at a time when there was no one else to do it. Social programs simply did not exist on behalf of most Mexicans because of discrimination, lack of political clout, and lack of U.S. citizenship. The Mexican Consul in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1920s, for example, worked with La Brigada Cruz Azul in the community of Lorain in order to help Mexican people who needed social services. One of the major projects for La Brigada was the establishment of groups to maintain and promote the Mexican culture among the youth:

We were very concerned with the social plight of the young women and men in our community. We sponsored and promoted youth clubs and cultural activities, and provided tutoring for students with their homework. For us, formal education was a critical way for our youth to progress in life.

It was our hope that the youth would be our future leaders and carry on the community agenda for cultural self-determination.<sup>28</sup>

Unrelenting in their crusade for racial equality, Mexican women and men also established several civil rights associations. These groups included La Sociedad Protectora Mexicana, La Sociedad de Defensa, El Comité Mexicano Contra El Racismo, and the Mexican American Civic Councils.<sup>29</sup> These populist associations concerned themselves primarily with promoting the civil rights of Mexicans and challenging the political and economic inequalities confronted by the Spanish-speaking community. Members coordinated several demonstrations opposing police brutality and protesting the mistreatment of the undocumented population by the immigration service.

Some of these organizations also directed economic boycotts against unscrupulous businesses, exposed crooked labor contractors and deceptive insurance agents, sponsored rallies against schools that discriminated against Mexican students, and published newspapers to counter unfair reporting on Mexicans by the Anglo press:

*La Sociedad Protectora Mexicana* was an outspoken critic regarding the overt discrimination of Mexicans in the United States. *La Sociedad* exemplified the most vocal and active organizers in the community in pursuit of legal and constitutional protections. They took courageous stands against wage discrimination, police brutality, economic swindles, the notorious sweeps by the immigration service, and the traumatic experiences of Mexican children being placed in inferior schools.<sup>30</sup>

As noted earlier, a significant number of Mexican women were active with youth groups in the community. As a matter of course, Mexican women were viewed as the cultural caretakers of the community and family. The young people were given intensive instruction, for example, about the long and rich history of Mexico and were encouraged to be well-informed about traditional customs and practices of that country. Other youth activities sponsored and organized by Mexican women included field trips, arts and crafts, lectures, and sports activities for both girls and boys. These recreational activities were part of the community's overall political agenda of culturally grooming a new set of generational leaders. A Mexican American woman who has been involved with youth activities noted:

The Mexican youth groups placed a heavy emphasis on the cultural aspects of our people, including traditions, customs, folklore, religious ceremonies, and language. Yet, at the same time, these youth clubs reflected an undercurrent of political consciousness. Culture and politics were intertwined. Our parents believed that by being proud of our culture, we would, therefore, promote democracy and full-citizenship for ourselves in this country.<sup>31</sup>

The Mexican community in Kansas City organized chapters of both the Girl Scouts and the Brownies to provide young women field trips, first-aid training, and sports activities. La Sociedad de La Victoria also provided recreational and cultural activities to Mexican girls. In Detroit, they formed the Chapultepec Association, which appealed largely to unmarried young Mexican women; while in Lorain, Ohio, Las Aguilas Girl's Club was formed immediately after World War II.

Besides the groups cited above, Mexican women were active with cultural associations and social activities, especially in Kansas, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. Most mutual-aid societies that sponsored the community fiestas were dominated by men, but a few mutual-aid associations included women as full-fledged members, while others established women's auxiliaries. In truth, women were involved at every level of making ready the fiestas:

Preparing for the fiestas was a total community effort. Everybody participated—men, women, and children. This teamwork reinforced our culture and a deeper sense of community unity. The assemblage of the stage, for example, took the efforts of everyone to construct. The entire community worked almost the entire week preparing for the fiestas on the weekend. Women helped preparing the food, printing the posters and programs, securing the entertainment, constructing the floats, designing and sewing the elaborate costumes, and organizing for the big dance on Saturday night.<sup>32</sup>

The fiestas were a pivotal part in advancing the ethnic agenda of the Mexican community. The selection of the queen and her court was critical, for example, to the overall success of the fiestas because it symbolized the hallmark origin of *La Patria*. Also, prior to World War II, most queens were selected on the basis of who sold the most tickets supporting their candidacy. In this way, the funds generated by the young women helped underwrite some of the expenses incurred by the fiesta committee:

The coronation of the queen and her court was one of the highlights of the

fiestas. The selection of the young women brought incredible pride to both their families and the communities they represented. Many of the young women who were selected as queens and princesses said that this unique experience broadened their hopes regarding education.<sup>33</sup>

Young women were also involved with another vital part of the fiestas. Two young women would be chosen to represent Mexico and Spain, debating in Spanish the advantages and disadvantages of Mexico's gaining its independence. This part of the fiesta program was clearly promoting the cultural and political ideology *de la independencia*. The young woman speaking on behalf of Spain, for example, attempted to convince Mexico to remain a colony and enjoy the full benefits of the Spanish Empire. The young woman representing Mexico, on the other hand, disagreed with Spain and discussed the dream of Mexico's becoming an independent nation.

Besides their social work, contributions to community organizations, and the fiestas, Mexican women were also involved in the fine arts and sports. The relationship of the fine arts, and sports to gender equality presents a complex picture. Several women noted, for example, that these types of community activities constantly invented and transmitted themselves in dynamic ways that promoted gender pride among Mexican women. Women's church choirs sang, for example, during mass and on religious holidays. Some of these choirs included the Mexican Women's Choir in Silvis, Illinois, which was established in 1925, and the Detroit Choir which was established in 1943 :

Mexican women were an integral part of the musical traditions in nearly all communities. Women performed as musicians, singers, and dancers. It was singing, however, where women were the most talented. Women sang in churches, during the fiestas, birthdays, weddings, and funerals.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to church choirs, Mexican women sang in duets, as solo vocalists with Mexican orchestras, and as members of popular singing groups. Some of these groups were Las Hermanas de Rockford (Illinois) and Las Dulceneras of Emporia, Kansas. Additionally:

The community of East Chicago had several different types of women's musical groups, including Las Jalisiences Duet, Las Hermanitas Gomez, the Fiestas Patrias Singers, and the Mexican Girl's Choir. Women sang in the church, the fiesta, community activities, and on the radio. We were not

merely background for the men, but equal in every way when it came to our rich tradition of music.<sup>35</sup>

Some Mexican women were also active in sports, especially baseball, before World War II. Women provided their fair share of athletic vitality within the narrow confines of the Mexican communities. Prior to World War II, there were several Mexican women's baseball teams in the Midwest:

Many of the young women were active with all types of sports in school. We formed community baseball teams because we enjoyed the competition. Most of our parents were very supportive as long as our brothers and male friends were our chaperons. We played against other Mexican women's teams from other communities.<sup>36</sup>

The best known teams were Las Gallinas of East Chicago; Las Cuauhtemocs of Newton, Kansas; Las Aztecas of Kansas City, Missouri; Las Amapolas, and Las Palomas of South Chicago. There were women's teams also in Chicago; Emporia, Kansas; and Gary and Whitney, Indiana. The state of Nebraska had teams in Beard, Grand Island, Omaha, and Lincoln. According to several eyewitnesses, many of the women's teams were excellent, and exciting to watch field, hit, and pitch:

They performed with devotion, speed, and great skill. The audience loved every great play they made, especially a stolen base. The parents made sure the girls were on time for all games and practice [*sic*]. They played in South Chicago, Whiting, Gary, Hessville . . . hundreds came out to see them play.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to community teams, Mexican women played baseball for the Catholic Youth Organizations (CYO) and in city leagues.

Women's social versatility in community organizations, cultural activities, and participation in sports and the fine arts helped them develop both self-reliance and team work, preparing them for unforeseen challenges during World War II and the post-war civil rights movement:

Young Mexican American women were very proud of our mothers, grandmothers, and aunts who were active with religious, civic, and cultural associations prior to the war. As young women, we were involved with the fiestas and sports, which helped us learn to be responsible and mature. We also learned to be independent because we were given difficult tasks by our

parents to do on our own. Little did we know at the time that these activities would eventually help us cope during the war and provide us with the skills for the civil rights movement afterwards.<sup>38</sup>

### *World War II: The Political and Social Impact on Mexican American Women*

The majority of Mexican families in the Midwest prevailed in the 1920s and 1930s against an inhospitable assemblage of physical displacement, cultural isolation, unflattering stereotypes, and inflammatory accusations of un-American behavior (accusations brought on by their insistence on maintaining their Mexican culture.) The obstacles Mexicans overcame during the twenties and the Great Depression were, in retrospect, only a dreadful preparation for their upcoming struggles during World War II and the post-war period.

The war was a pivotal event in the development of the Mexican community in the Midwest. At the time of Pearl Harbor, Mexican Americans were not even aware of the unexpected challenges and changes that were about to take place in their community and personal lives. The war would lead to an upswing in community solidarity and produced a new generation of leaders who were bi-cultural and from working-class backgrounds.

The community's fortitude to survive against all odds during the 1920s and 1930s explains in large measure its deep-rooted spirit of optimism both during and after the war. World War II was also a defining moment for Mexican women because it led to their social, cultural, and political transformation. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, profoundly changed the entire Mexican community, and women in particular, forever:

On December 7, 1941, I was on an electric train between Milwaukee and Chicago when I heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The war changed all of our lives dramatically. I was later stationed for nearly four years in Orlando, Florida, in the Air Corps. All of my sisters worked in defense work during the war. It was difficult for me coping with our family being scattered every which way.<sup>39</sup>

The Mexican American residents of the Midwest, along with the rest of the nation, anxiously sat in front of their Philco, Motorola, or RCA radios and listened as President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked for a declaration of war against Japan. Many of the non-English speaking Mexicans listened to the Mexican

radio programs on Sundays and read the Spanish-language newspapers for up-to-date news regarding the war.

Mexican American women made key contributions during World War II. Midwest Mexican American women labored as riveters, crane operators, welders, assemblers, railroad section workers, roundhouse mechanics, forklift and crane operators, meatpackers, farmworkers, seamstresses, nurses, secretaries, pipe fitters, janitors, and shipyard workers:

My family came from Mexico to Chicago in 1924. In June, 1941, I started working for Abbott Labs as a typist. When the war broke out, I volunteered to work in the labs producing medicine for the war. I worked two shifts every week. In addition, I purchased war bonds to help our nation. My sister Lina worked at the local tannery making military boots, duffel bags, and military suitcases.<sup>40</sup>

The wartime contributions of Mexican American women were not confined solely to work in defense industries. A significant number of Mexican American women eventually enlisted in the military service, with some of them serving overseas prior to the conclusion of the war in 1945. Several Midwest Mexican American communities were represented by women in the armed forces during the war, including Topeka, Kansas; Davenport, Iowa; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Lincoln, Nebraska; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Depue, Illinois; and East Chicago, Indiana. The Mexican community of East Chicago actually had seven young women serve during the war.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, thousands of other Mexican American women aided the war effort by assisting in home-front activities such as organizing war bond drives, working with the local Red Cross, cultivating victory gardens, and collecting scrap metal for armaments:

The fiestas during the war had a different focus. For example, we sold war bonds, honored our fighting men and women, and had moments of silence and prayers for those killed in action. Also, in some of the fiestas, we had someone dress like Uncle Sam to pay tribute to our nation.<sup>42</sup>

Some young Mexican American women also formed social clubs, modeled after the USO, for Mexican American servicemen who were often barred from other establishments as a result of racial discrimination:



Many public places in Kansas did not allow Mexican American servicemen, including dance halls, bars, and restaurants. We formed a group called Las Señoritas, an extension of our local YWCA. We raised funds to sponsor dances and other cultural activities for these young military men. It was nice seeing them having a good time and forgetting about the war for a while.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, there are no accurate records regarding the total numbers of Mexican American women who were employed in the Midwest during the war because Mexican American workers were simply categorized as “white” for purposes of company records. Based on extensive interviews, however, it appears that a significant percentage of Mexican women worked during the war. Mexican American defense workers were a diversified group comprising single women, married and divorced women, women over 50, and mother-daughter combinations in the workplace.

Before the war, it was not unusual for single daughters living at home to work. Their employment was limited mainly to sewing and laundry and domestic work. Young, unmarried Mexican American women, in particular, applied for defense work for a variety of reasons, including the high pay, the glamour and excitement of such work, and the fact that defense work might provide the means to escape from a rigid upbringing at home. Mexican American single women also found new employment opportunities during the war in various department stores as sales clerks:

Prior to the war, the only jobs available to young Mexican women were non-skilled types of occupations such as making cardboard boxes and sewing clothes. The war allowed us, for the first time, job opportunities as sales clerks and defense workers. The government was actually training us with job skills that would help us after the war.<sup>44</sup>

The most significant change for Mexican females, however, was in the number of married women who were now working outside the home. Before the war, married women might help supplement the family income by taking in work at home, such as washing, ironing, sewing, and taking care of children and boarders. This great change during the war was based on a realistic appraisal of the situation at hand. With so many young men off to war, other family members now had to earn the money for rent and food.

During the war years, Mexican American women were employed in a vari-

ety of war-related occupations, especially in the areas of aircraft, munitions, railroads, steel, and meatpacking for military rations. The majority of Mexican American aircraft workers were employed in Missouri, Kansas, Michigan, Ohio, and Oklahoma. Mexican American women were particularly in demand in this industry because of their small stature, which was an advantage when it came to working in cramped spaces aboard aircraft.

Mexican American munitions workers helped produce bombs, fuses, timing devices, bullets, machine guns, shell casings, land mines, bomb caps, cartridge belts, grenades, light and heavy artillery, and rocket launchers. Meanwhile, over in the steel industry, Mexican American women found employment in the steel mills of Chicago, East Chicago, Detroit, Lorain, Cleveland, and Gary. Mexican American women, many weighing no more than ninety pounds, worked in the rolling mills, the blast furnaces, and the open hearths of the steel mills.

At the steel mills, they also operated cranes and operated punch presses, served as painters, loaders, welders, and riveters, and played an important part in the production of iron and steel for tanks, concertina wire, bullets, shells, jeeps, trucks, and steel beams for military housing:

I came to Detroit from Texas in 1944 because I had heard from people living in Detroit that the steel companies were looking for workers. I made steel beams for army and navy housing. I also worked as a painter and welder. At least 50 Mexican women worked in the paint department. Many women were, like myself, from Texas. We spoke Spanish with no problems from our supervisors (*sic*). After the war, many women and men returned to Texas. I stayed here in the Detroit area.<sup>45</sup>

Mexican women also worked for the railroads during the war years, their work facilitated by the fact that many Mexican communities were located right along the tracks. Mexican American women labored as section workers, round-house mechanics, drawbridge operators, train dispatchers, loaders, maintenance workers, waitresses in the railroad lunchrooms, and as clerks in the ticket offices. Some Mexican American women also served as translators between the large number of Mexican *braceros* employed by the railroads and their Anglo supervisors.

Finally, there were the meatpacking centers of the United States, historically located in the Midwest—especially in Omaha, Chicago, Topeka, St. Jo-

seph, and Kansas City. All of these cities had significant Mexican populations, and many of the large meatpacking companies during the war hired Mexican American women who worked as pork and beef trimmers, butchers, and packers. These women helped produce the "C" and "K" rations for servicemen.

For the Mexican American women who entered the labor force during World War II, the experience was difficult because of the unaccustomed separation from family members and friends, racial and sexual discrimination, worries about child care, and the physical demands of the work. A large majority of the women interviewed, however, agreed that the long-term personal and community benefits resulting from the war outweighed the short-term inconveniences.

Mexican American women confronted a host of other problems, including budgeting their ration stamps, paying the bills, raising their children, grocery shopping, and constantly writing to loved ones overseas. Nevertheless, these economic and social difficulties were always overshadowed by the grim possibility that they could be notified that a father, brother, son, or husband had been killed in action.

All of the women vividly remember where they were and what they were doing on that unforgettable day when they heard the news that the war had finally come to an end. One woman recalled:

I was welding some materials together for a part of a tank when all of sudden I noticed lots of commotion on the work floor as women were hugging and crying. I turned off my torch gun and heard the company whistle tooting and tooting. One of my friends ran up to me and told me that the war was over. I remember sitting down on a work bench, placing my hands over my face and crying. All of the emotion which had been locked up for all these four years was released. All I could think about was that our boys would finally be coming home to be reunited with their families.<sup>46</sup>

After the war, some Mexican American family members of veterans traveled to Mexico in order to settle their *mandas* (vows) to La Virgen de San Juan de Los Lagos. The parents of these returning veterans had made a promise that they would travel to Mexico to give thanks to the Blessed Mother if she protected their loved ones during this great global conflict.

As Mexican American servicemen and defense workers slowly adjusted to peacetime, however, they were again confronted with the emotionally charged reminders of their pre-war, second-class status. Their hopes for a better life had

soared during and immediately after the war, but now their hopes plummeted because of the harsh realities of racism. Mexican Americans who had defended this country were again denied public entrance to bars, restaurants, barber shops, and pool halls.<sup>47</sup>

Such acts of visible racism were commonplace throughout the Midwest. Despite some forms of token social integration, the Mexican community had reason to be outraged by such actions as organized drives by some Anglos to prevent Mexican Americans from moving into their neighborhoods, even with the assistance of the G.I. Bill. Not surprisingly, many Mexican American veterans and former defense workers felt utterly betrayed, but not dispirited, by the country they had served so well during the war.<sup>48</sup>

The Mexican American community also was losing patience with unpaved streets, segregated housing, inadequate sewage facilities, the lack of recreational services in Mexican neighborhoods, and the restrictions placed on Mexicans who visited certain movie houses, restaurants, parks, and churches:

During the war, there was lessening of discrimination by some public places because they needed our money, with so many Anglos in the service. After the war, some restaurants, stores, and taverns again refused to serve us on an equal basis with whites. We knew this was totally unfair because we had worked hard to win the war. At that moment, my generation realized we had to do something to change this social condition, not only for ourselves but for our children. We didn't want our children to experience the social and economic hardships we suffered during the Depression and the war.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the disappointing aftermath, the war years unquestionably modified the social and political attitudes of Mexican Americans, and there was a particular change—and a positive one—in the traditional roles of women at home, in the workplace, and in the larger community. Many women believed the war marked a historical turning point in their lives and in the community, because it provided them with an unprecedented opportunity to develop political awareness, social independence, and economic self-reliance—personal strengths and skills that were exceedingly important in the post-war movement for Mexican American rights in the Midwest:

All of us were definitely changed by the four years of defense work. Prior to the war, we were young women with few social and job skills. But the war altered these conditions very quickly. By the end of the war, we had been transformed into young, mature women with new job skills, self-confi-

dence, and a sense of worth as a result of our war contributions. Just as the war had changed boys into men, the same thing happened to us girls. We were now women.<sup>50</sup>

Mexican American women generally defined their own personal rights in a broader way after the war, and took them to mean—among other things—an equal voice in the decision-making at home, the right to pursue educational goals, the right to seek outside employment, and the freedom to participate in community organizations. These social and cultural concepts of gender equality were unprecedented in scope and a major breakthrough for the equal opportunity of women.

The recession during the early part of the 1950s also forced many Mexican American men to reconsider their objections to married women in the workplace. It was becoming obvious that a single paycheck could no longer provide the income needed to raise a family. Over time, some men came to accept the fact that their own upward social mobility depended, in large measure, on the additional income generated by their wives. This growing economic importance of women also helped change the political attitudes of men toward women regarding gender equality. There was, for example, a group of influential Mexican American men who actively supported wider civic and political participation by women.<sup>51</sup> These men clearly understood that their own political aspirations were, to some extent, contingent on the emerging voting power of Mexican American women.

During the war, many of us registered to vote for the first time and later marked our ballots for FDR for President. We were active with the fiestas, volunteering for the local Red Cross, the USO, and working with church groups. All of these community experiences helped us develop our organizational skills and develop networks among the women. As it turned out, these skills and networks were valuable for our community after the war.<sup>52</sup>

The expanding political and economic roles of Mexican American women dramatically redefined the notion of leadership after World War II. The war permanently transformed a new order of gender politics in the Midwest. This ongoing change in gender leadership was clearly seen a few years later when the Korean War broke out. A number of Mexican American women noted in retrospect that their employment and community involvement during the Korean War had the full support of their men. This was not always the case during

World War II, when there was a cultural backlash by some of the male leadership. This gradual change in attitude by the male leadership can be attributed largely to the advances by women, and the increasing recognition of the political and economic value of women. Most Mexican American women felt that this unconditional endorsement of their participation during the Korean War was a yardstick of their growing political importance and their developing social equality within the Mexican American community during the post-war period.<sup>53</sup>

### *The Roles and Contributions of Midwest Mexican American Women in the Post-War Civil Rights Movement*

The post-war period witnessed a significant demographic change within the Mexican American community in the Midwest. Mexican Americans, characterizing many walks of life, blended into a multitude of sub-cultures. There were, for example, Mexicans personifying such diverse groups as Mexican *braceros*, Texas migrant workers, and first and second generations of Midwest Mexican Americans. In addition, Puerto Rican migration into the Midwest was significant in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Mexican American women representing various segments of the community continued, in their own unique ways, to regenerate the rich legacy of progressive struggle.

By the 1950s, Mexican American women, for example, employed a new sense of community diplomacy through a full-range of political, economic, and cultural strategies to meet the challenges of discrimination. Women moved aggressively to widen the community agenda by speaking out in favor of more and better street lights, parks, recreational centers, senior citizen housing, bus service, and paved streets. They also enriched the political menu by introducing several innovative forms of conciliatory, yet potent tactics for the social transformation of the community.

Women also brought different perspectives regarding strategies for social change. Our approach was different from the men. Whereas Mexican American men attempted to verbally and physically intimidate the Anglo establishment, we women appealed to what was best for the entire community. Anglo and Mexican men were many times too stubborn to compromise—afraid it was a sign of male weakness. Mexican women, on the other hand, generally sought consensus building, which was sometimes slow, but

an effective method for social change. Sometimes, both approaches effectively complemented each other.<sup>54</sup>

The broad community outlook of Mexican Americans was that they had earned the right to be treated as first-class citizens, since they had fought and worked side-by-side with Anglos on the battlefield and in the defense plants. The post-war Mexican American generation of leaders first sought political guidance from their elders on ways of challenging institutional discrimination. But sadly, the combination of the Depression, the Repatriation Program, World War II, and internal factionalism had taken its toll on the older Mexican leadership resulting in an organizational void in the community, despite its astonishing endurance.

To provide effective leadership, therefore, Mexican Americans formed several organizations in the Midwest in the late 1940s and the 1950s.<sup>55</sup> These organizations, unprecedented in scope, predated by nearly ten years the recruitment drives by the national offices of the G.I. Forum and LULAC in the Midwest. In addition to being active in the establishment of these early Mexican American organizations, Mexican women also formed their own groups, such as the Latin-American Ladies' Clubs, and formed local chapters with Anglo-led state organizations such as the Mothers of World War II. About the Mothers of World War II of Indiana, it was said:

The purpose of the organization was to unite all mothers of sons or daughters who served in the armed forces of the United States during World War II, to help those sons and daughters to foster and perpetuate the American way of life, and to aid and assist in teaching the advantages of freedom and the duties and obligations of citizenship in the United States of America.<sup>56</sup>

The establishment of these post-World War II organizations signaled the birth of a new era in the Mexican community, as the first generation gradually relinquished their leadership to the second, American-born generation.

In 1961, President John Kennedy talked about the passing of the torch from one generation to another generation. The same can be said of the post-war period when Mexican American veterans and defense workers representing the second-generation claimed their leadership roles in the community. It represented both a new era and the end of an era. The contributions and progress made by our parents' generation was the foundation for our organizations.<sup>57</sup>

As a consequence of this generational changeover, Mexican American organizations forged ahead in the courageous fight to abolish the remaining vestiges of overt public discrimination. They sought to eliminate the unfair poll tax and literacy requirements for voting, to end the practice of excluding Mexican Americans on juries, to confront discrimination in labor unions, to thwart restrictive housing covenants, and to legally challenge discriminatory educational policies hurting Mexican American children. The new leadership of women and men also promoted voter registration drives, sponsored citizenship classes and political forums, and encouraged political involvement in all its forms by members of the Mexican American community.<sup>58</sup>

All of these activities helped erase most of the unfair election laws in the Midwest, and directly led to the election of a few Mexican American candidates to local political offices in the 1950s and early 1960s. Mexican American women played important roles in these campaigns; most community leaders, in fact, would probably agree that women were the organizational backbone of nearly all the early campaigns.<sup>59</sup> Women walked precincts, designed and printed campaign materials, addressed and stuffed envelopes, operated phone banks, and organized the community to get out the vote on election day.

There is no doubt that women played a key role in the development of Mexican American politics. Women's networks are centered in the heart of the community with neighborhood associations, church and school groups, and the fiestas. These networks were critically important during political campaigns.<sup>60</sup>

One woman activist recalled that:

In 1968, I protested the fact that none of the poll watchers and officials were Mexicans. No Mexicans were allowed to work the polls. We protested and some of us were reluctantly recruited as volunteers but were assigned to the back room, away from the public view. We protested these actions as well and eventually won our right to be represented in the political process.<sup>61</sup>

A significant chapter in the evolution of Mexican American politics was the "Viva Kennedy" movement in 1959 and 1960. The vast majority of Mexican Americans culturally identified themselves with U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy, because, among other things, he was a Catholic, a war hero, and he could trace his ethnic roots to a large immigrant family.



The "Viva Kennedy" national campaign marked a historical watershed for Mexican Americans for three major reasons. First, this was the first campaign in which Mexican Americans were planning strategies and setting the agenda at the national level rather than the local level. Second, the campaign served as a sort of catalyst for consolidating the vast array of Mexican American local organizations into a single national movement; and third, it provided the boost that was needed to bring about the election of dozens of Mexican Americans to offices at the local, state, and congressional levels.

The "Viva Kennedy" campaign has often been viewed as a Southwestern political phenomenon. In reality, however, the Midwest Mexican American community was also extremely active politically during this campaign in Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, and Iowa.<sup>62</sup> One Mexican American woman who was an ardent supporter of Kennedy recalled:

The Kennedy campaign had tremendous Mexican American support in the Midwest. We formed several local and state chapters of the "Viva Kennedy" clubs. The Mexican community voted for Kennedy in Iowa, Michigan, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. Mexican American women were truly partners with the men working on behalf of Senator Kennedy.<sup>63</sup>

Around the time of this campaign, both the Texas-based G.I. Forum and LULAC formed state chapters in the Midwest. Several Midwest Mexican American women then went on to hold national positions with these two groups; as Mary Machuca of East Chicago, Indiana, was elected Second National Vice-President of LULAC in 1957, and Maxine Rodriguez was elected the National Women's Chair of the G.I. Forum in 1983. LULAC and the G.I. Forum were very active in pushing for Mexican American appointments to state commissions, civil rights and human relations boards, migrant agencies, and educational task forces. Through LULAC and the G.I. Forum in the Midwest, Mexican American women have contributed immensely to the political visibility of their community.

LULAC and the G.I. Forum have been and continue to be critical organizations in the Midwest. They are involved with issues ranging from voting rights to senior citizen housing to economic development. Yet, their legacy will center on their generous investment in the field of education. From the beginning, both groups have seen education as the key to all change. The younger generation owes a great amount of gratitude to LULAC and

the G.I. Forum for their tireless efforts for educational equality.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to their political and educational interests, Mexican American women were active in the labor movement after the war. The union movement was critical to the social advancement of Mexican Americans in the late 1940s and the 1950s. A significant number of women had become union members and leaders as a result of working in union shops. Mary Rivera Ruiz, for example, joined the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of America in 1956. In 1972, she was elected Vice-President of Local 26 and in 1974 became Associate Manpower Representative for the AFL-CIO Human Resources Development Institute in Detroit, Michigan. Furthermore, the Inland Steel Company Twenty-Five Year Club included, as members, 14 Mexican American women with 25 years of company service or more.<sup>65</sup> Louise Perez had nearly 45 years of experience with the company. Another female union member looked back on her union experience and said:

Many Mexican American women were card-carrying union members since 1942. Women belonged to several unions, including the steelworkers, railroad workers, meat cutters, mechanics, and retail clerks. Some of us were union members before our brothers and husbands, who didn't become union members until they returned home from the war.<sup>66</sup>

A Mexican American female union organizer observed that:

My father came to work for the railroads from Mexico in 1909. For his generation, many companies in collusion with the Anglo unions locked out the best jobs for Mexicans. After the war, I ran for a union position with the United Autoworkers union Local 144 and won. The company was the Mack Truck Company. Mexican American women in the union were actively engaged in voter registration campaigns, and organizing the community.<sup>67</sup>

Additionally, Mexican American women and men were instrumental in the establishment of civic improvement associations in the forties and fifties. These groups offered a bold departure from the popular strategy of electoral politics, operating at the grass-roots level, and placing pressure on elected and appointed officials from outside the political system. The active involvement of women with these civic groups further strengthened the democratic fabric within the Mexican American community.

Civic and improvement associations believed in neighborhood politics rather than city hall politics, including Mexican American elected and appointed officials. It was not that these groups mistrusted Mexican American public officials; they simply mistrusted the system which can corrupt even the best intentions of public officials, even our own.<sup>68</sup>

Across the Midwest, Mexican Americans established nearly one hundred civic improvement associations from the late 1940s through the 1970s. These associations wrestled with serious issues during this time and sparked a frenzy of activity in the neighborhoods. Mexican American women, for example, were involved with these associations because the groups tended to be neighborhood-based and focused on issues of special concern to women, including safer parks, better police and fire protection, better street lighting, higher quality schools, and more frequent garbage collection.

Mexican American women also continued to be actively involved with the fine arts and sports in the aftermath of World War II and Korea. Again, sports and the fine arts were meaningful indicators measuring the expanding social and cultural roles of women in all aspects of community life. Women's softball teams, for example, flourished in the period from the late 1940s through the 1960s. Women also were participants on Mexican American mixed bowling teams, and in leagues such as the Quad-Cities Women's Bowling League and the Latin American Ladies Bowling League. The latter included many teams from throughout the Midwest.

Mexican American women were very active with bowling teams and leagues after World War II. Many women were members of both company and community teams. We had excellent women bowlers. The nice thing about bowling was that it was a total family affair.<sup>69</sup>

In the arts, Mexican American women contributed significantly to dance, music, and the theater.<sup>70</sup> As was the case before World War II, there were dozens of Mexican women's choirs or *coros* after 1945, including Las Señoritas De Parsons, Kansas, in the early 1960s. Women's singing groups continued the rich tradition started by their grandmothers in the 1920s. The groups sang in church, during the fiestas, *Las Posadas*, and other community functions. The presence of women became much more visible after the war, as they enthusiastically expanded their roles and responsibilities in all facets of community life.

### *Conclusion*

The 1960s was a period of stress and catastrophic change for Mexican Americans after the civil rights gains of the late 1940s and the 1950s. For one thing, the hard-won gains of Mexican American citizens were overshadowed in this period by events and movements that competed for public attention with the movement for Mexican American rights. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, for example, was a devastating blow to Mexican American social and political aspirations.

The majority of Mexican Americans had believed strongly that President Kennedy would articulate their goals at the national level, and pursue policies favorable to their aims. In contrast to the 1960 Kennedy campaign, Mexican American support for Lyndon Johnson in 1964 lacked a strong emotional commitment, despite the establishment of a national "Viva Johnson" campaign.

Furthermore, the late 1960s saw the emergence of the Chicano Movement, which tended to view the preceding generations of Mexican Americans as too accommodating to the Anglo power structure. This new generation of Chicano community leaders was impatient with the slow progress towards equal opportunity that came with the electoral politics pursued by the earlier generation of Mexican American leaders.<sup>71</sup> In spite of political victories, union gains, and the social progress achieved by their predecessors, the Chicano leaders felt that racism still permeated American education, politics, health care, housing, and the marketplace for labor, services, and ideas.

Members of the Chicano Movement believed that drastic confrontational tactics had to be pursued in order to shake up the political establishment. For many, the Chicano Movement symbolized a higher level of political consciousness and cultural pride.

The Chicano Movement further multiplied the political and social movements within our community. By the late 1960s, there were several different types of organizations representing a wide spectrum of political and cultural ideologies. There were mutual-aid societies, the G.I. Forum and LULAC, and now the cultural nationalist groups.<sup>72</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s also saw the continued demographic changes taking place among Latinos in the Midwest. In addition to the three distinct generations of Midwest Mexican Americans and migrant workers, the Puerto Rican

and Cuban communities emerged as political competitors to the Mexican American leadership. During these two decades many professional Latin Americans arrived from Argentina, Columbia, Chile, Equador, and Brazil, and formed a variety of Latino groups.

The older generations of Mexican Americans, however, refused to simply step aside in the struggle for civil rights despite political rivalry from both outside and inside the community. During this increasingly troublesome time, they lived up to their hard-earned reputation as durable leaders in the face of persistent adversity. The G.I. Forum, for example, launched the Coors boycott, and both the Forum and LULAC were strong backers of the California farmworker movement led by César Chávez, and both groups supported bilingual legislation and the end of the *bracero* program. Women and men of the World War II generation were instrumental in establishing Mexican American state commissions and electing Mexican American candidates to local and state offices in the 1970s.<sup>73</sup>

In hindsight, several Midwest women involved in the Chicano Movement credited their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts for their political awareness, because these women served as their role models and mentors. Many Chicanas recalled growing up in households where their mothers and other women were involved in community issues during the 1940s and 1950s, including political campaigns, migrant services, the educational reform movement, and the push for economic development.<sup>74</sup>

Like the generations of women before them, Chicanas carried on the activist tradition of Mexican American women in the Midwest and were directly involved with La Raza Unida Party, the Chicano student movement, the Brown Berets, the United Farmworkers' boycott of grapes and lettuce, the Campbell Soup boycott, and the antiwar movement during the Vietnam conflict. The 1970s and 1980s saw continued expansion of Mexican American women's organizations in the Midwest:

Mexican American women have played and continue to play major roles in the political, economic, and cultural advancements of the community. Women were involved in the community prior to World War II. In addition, Mexican American women were in the forefront of the Chicano Movement. Yet, many issues directly affecting women have not yet been addressed. These issues include wage and job discrimination, family planning, domestic violence, lack of prenatal care, sexual harassment, and lack

of educational opportunities. The 1970s and 1980s saw the development of a strong women's movement for resolution of these problems.<sup>75</sup>

Much of the contemporary research on the early Mexican and Mexican American generations continues to focus primarily on the Southwestern male viewpoint. This narrow outlook ignores the critical contributions women made to the social and political development of Mexican Americans throughout the country from the 1920s to the 1960s. Thus, more research is needed in order to substantiate, for example, the changing ratio of Mexican men to women during this time period, and how this fluid proportion between the sexes may have affected the varying degrees of leadership among women; how industrial and agricultural economies may have had contrary influences regarding the development of women's organizations; the possible correlation between the prototypes of women's organizations and the levels of cultural acculturation and economic class; and the political dimensions of the fine arts and sports in promoting gender equality.

In conclusion, it must be said that most of the living Mexican Americans that first settled in the Midwest as children are now in their 70s and 80s. Despite their ages, however, many are still very active with community organizations. Others are involved, for example, with teaching folkloric dance and other fine arts to the latest generation of Mexican American children in the Midwest. Other members of this older generation are helping Chicano scholars and other researchers document the rich history of the Mexican people in the Midwest through oral history.

Some are also organizing senior citizen groups—including *El Club Social Mexicano*, *Los Amigos Retirees Club*, and the Spanish-Speaking Senior Citizens—to address the special issues and needs of the Mexican American elderly. Many key leaders of the senior citizen movement in the Midwest are Mexican American women. The inescapable conclusion is that this Mexican American generation continues to provide a sense of stability and a strong bond of continuity for both the Chicano generation which came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s and the current set of young Mexican American leaders in the 1990s.

The legacy of the early Mexican American immigrants in the Midwest is that they continuously challenged all of the signs and symbols of racial bigotry, sexism, and xenophobia. The importance of their contributions is measured by the fact that each year that passes lends further luster to their outstanding achieve-

ments. In a moving tribute to the first two generations of Mexican women and men in the Midwest, a community organizer observed that these two earlier generations gave generously of themselves during their entire adult lives:

The first and second generations are slowly passing away in our community. There are very few of the first generation still alive today. The second generation is also getting up in years. Remarkably, many of the leaders of the senior citizen movement today are the same people who were active in the 1930s and 1940s. They began organizing in the early part of this century and have continued into the 1990s. It is only fitting that our original leaders have come full circle regarding their community commitment, from their youth until their golden years.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This article is an excerpt from an upcoming book entitled *Cuentos y Encuentros: Mexican Social and Cultural Organizations in the Midwestern United States, The Politics of Self-Reliance, 1914-1950*. The author wishes to thank Stuart Anderson for his excellent editing and suggestions. Also, my heartfelt gratitude and respect to all of the women and men interviewed for this article. Many of the people cited reside in Kansas. The reason for this is that Kansas was an important entry point for many people arriving from Texas and Mexico. Kansas also has the dubious reputation of having been the most racist state regarding Mexicans, which explains, in large part, the organizational resistance by the community.
- <sup>2</sup> George J. Sanchez, *Mexican American Ethnicity, Culture and Identity In Chicano Los Angeles*, Oxford University Press, 1993; Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 1930-1960*, Yale University Press; Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona*, University of California Press, 1994; Benjamin Marquez, *The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Association: LULAC*, University of Texas Press, 1993; Carl Allsup, *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution*, University of Texas Press, 1982; and Henry J. Ramos, *A People Forgotten, A Dream Pursued: The History of the American G.I. Forum, 1948-1972*, Volume I, American G.I. Forum, August, 1982.
- <sup>3</sup> Miguel David Tirado, "Mexican-American Community Political Organizations: The Key to Chicano Political Power," *Aztlan*, Spring, 1970; Salvador Alvarez, "Mexican-American Community Organizations," in *Voices: Readings from El Grito*, ed. Octavio Romano, Quinto Sol Publications, Berkeley, California, 1971; Rodolfo Alvarez, "The Psycho-Historical and Socioeconomic Development of the Chicano Community in the United States," *Social Science Quarterly*, March, 1973, pp.920-942; and Alfredo Cuellar, "Perspectives on Politics, Part I," *La Causa Política: A Chicano Politics Reader*, edited by F. Chris García,

University of Notre Dame Press, 1974, pp. 34-46. These articles provide historical overviews regarding the perspective of cultural assimilation and political accommodation of early organizations.

- 4 *Op. Cit.* Garica, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 1930-1960*, pp. 19-22.
- 5 Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River*, Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984; Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979; Richard A. García, *Rise of the Mexican Middle-Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941*, Texas A & M University Press, 1991; Juan Gómez-Quíñones, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990*, University of New Mexico Press, 1990; and Guadalupe San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981*, University of Texas Press, 1987. In all fairness, some of these publications do allude to the roles of Mexican women within the civil rights movement.
- 6 Felix M. Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1985; James B. Lane and Edward J. Escobar (Eds.), *Forging A Community: The Latino Experience in Northwest Indiana, 1919-1975*, Cattails Press, Chicago, 1987; Michael M. Smith, *The Mexicans in Oklahoma*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1980; Dennis Nodín Valdes, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970*, University of Texas Press, 1991; Juan R. García (Ed.), "Mexicans in the Midwest," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, Vol. 2, Mexican American Studies & Research Center, University of Arizona, 1989; Erasmo Gamboa, "Mexican Migration into Washington State," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, July, 1981; Fernando Padilla, "Mexicanization of the Lower Yakima Valley," *Revista Apple*, Vol. 2, No. 1-2, Spring, 1991; Daniel Estrada, *Political Mobilization and Representation in Mexican Origin Communities of Eastern Washington*, Unpublished paper, 1995; and Gilberto García, "Organizational Activity and Political Empowerment: Chicano Politics in the Pacific Northwest," *The Chicano Experience in the Northwest*, edited by Carlos S. Maldonado and Gilberto García, Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, Iowa, 1995, pp. 67-92.
- 7 Christine Marín, "La Asociación Hispano-Americano De Madres y Esposas: Tucson's Mexican American Women in World War II," *Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series Monograph*, Vol. 1, Mexican American Studies & Research Center, University of Arizona, 1985; Señoritas of Yesteryear (SOY), *Mexican American Harbor Lights*, East Chicago, Indiana, 1992; Teresa Córdova, "Roots and Resistance: The Emergent Writings of Twenty Years of Chicana Feminist Struggle," *Handbook Of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Sociology*, edited by Felix Padilla, Arte Publico Press, 1984, pp. 175-202; Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women/ Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950*, University of New Mexico Press, 1987; and Richard Santillán, "Rosita the Riveter: Midwest Mexican American Women During World War II," *Perspectives in Mexi-*



- can American Studies*, Vol. 2, Mexican American Studies & Research Center, University of Arizona, 1989.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Adam S. Kendzel, *Detroit's Pioneer Mexicans*, Littlefield Press, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1980; Susan M. Diebold, "The Mexicans," *They Chose Minnesota*, Minnesota Historical Society; Alicia Florez, Carmen García, and Eva Pierra, *Historia Mexicana: Topeka, Kansas*, Historia Mexicana, Inc., 1984; Chas. M. Meyers, "The Mexican Problem in Mason City," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, Iowa City, Iowa, April, 1929; Kathleen Eberdt, *Special People: Ethnic Contributions to the Bettendorf Community*, Bettendorf Museum(Iowa), 1983; Francisco A. Rosales, "Mexicans in Indiana Harbor During the 1920s: Prosperity and Depression," *Revista Chicano-Riquena*, Vol. 4, October, 1970; and Gilbert Cardenas, "Los Desarraigados: Chicanos in the Midwestern Region of the United States," *Aztlan*, Vol. 7 No. 2, 1974.
- <sup>9</sup> Interviews with Juana Caudillo, Hutchinson, Kansas, March 22, 1988, and Filiberto and Josefina D. Martinez, Elgin, Illinois, April 18, 1987. Also see Dennis Nodín Valdes, *El Pueblo Mexicano en Detroit y Michigan: A Social History*, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 1982; Minnesota Historical Society, *Mexicans in Minnesota*, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1977; and Juan R. García, "Midwest Mexicanos in the 1920s: Issues, Questions and Directions," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 19, April, 1982, pp. 89-99.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with Cruz Cruz, Wellington, Kansas, June 15, 1987. Also interviews with Carmen Martinez, Kansas City, Missouri, February 19, 1990, and Maria García de Orta, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, July 10, 1988. Mrs. Martinez was born in 1907 and Mrs. de Orta in 1903. Both women arrived in the Midwest during the early 1920's. Also see John Caro Russell, Jr., and Walter D. Broadway, *Minorities in Kansas: A Quest for Equal Opportunity*, Office of the Governor, Topeka, Kansas, 1968, and Ralph F. Grajeda, "Chicanos: The Mestizo Heritage," *Broken Hoops and Plains People*, Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, 1976.
- <sup>11</sup> Not all Mexicans, however, came directly to the Midwest from Mexico or Texas. A significant number of people worked first in Texas, Colorado, California, Wyoming, Idaho, or New Mexico before moving on to the Midwest. For example, only about 15 percent of the Mexican workers who settled in Illinois came directly from Mexico or the Texas border area. All the rest had been somewhere else in the United States for at least two years. See Ralph Cintrón, "Divided, Yet a City: A Brief History of Aurora, Illinois," *Perspectives In Mexican American Studies*, Vol. 3, 1992, Mexican American Studies & Research Center, University of Arizona, p.5. In the same volume, see Irene Campos Carr, "Mexican Workers in Aurora: The Oral History of Three Immigration Waves, 1924-1990," pp.31-51.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Sabastian Alvarez, Fort Madison, Iowa, June 19, 1986. Mr. Alvarez and his brother, Manuel, worked forty and fifty years, respectively, with the railroads, beginning in the early 1920s.

- <sup>13</sup> By 1927, the number of Mexican workers and their families in this region had reached 63,700, with nearly 80,000 in the busier summer months. See Zaragoza Vargas, "Armies in the Fields and Factories: The Mexican Working Classes in the Midwest in the 1920s," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Regents of the University of California, Winter, 1991, p. 51. Also see Earl T. Sullenger, "The Mexican Population of Omaha," *Journal of Applied Sociology*, Vol. 8, No. 5, 1924, pp. 50-57; Norman D. Humphrey, "The Migration and Settlement of Detroit Mexicans," *Economic Geography*, Vol. 19, 1943, pp. 358-361; and Micheal Hutchinson, *River of Steel/River of Sweat: The Hispanic Community in Muscatine, Iowa, 1919-1980*, Unpublished paper, 1988.
- <sup>14</sup> Interviews with Rita and Abe Morales, Gary Indiana, June 21, 1986; Filiberto Murguia, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 10, 1986; Irene García, Dodge City, Kansas, January 13, 1987; and Jesse Villalpando, Griffith, Indiana, June 21, 1986. All five individuals have spent their entire lives in the Midwest since the early 1920s and are considered community 'historians'. Also see Norman D. Humphrey, "Employment Patterns of Mexicans in Detroit," *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 68, No. 11, 1945, pp. 911-23, and Paul Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States: Chicago and the Calumet Region*, University of California Press, 1932,
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Francisco Vargas, Topeka, Kansas, February 12, 1987. Also see Walter W. Armentrout, et. al., *Child Labor in the Sugar Beet Fields of Michigan*, National Child Labor Committee, New York, 1923, and Zaragoza Vargas, *Mexican Auto Workers at Ford Motor Company, 1918-1933*, Ph.D Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1984. Mexican workers were more subject than native-born American workers to suffer industrial death, traumatic injury, or disability. The Midwest economy was inherently unfair and resulted in both social dislocations and economic injustices for the majority of Mexican workers. Behind the walls of towering industrial fortresses, Mexican workers fell victim to toxic dust, dangerous chemicals, noxious fumes, and work-related stress. Mexican workers faced constant dangers in packing houses, ice houses, salt mines, auto plants, steel works, and on the farms. Also, Mexican workers usually were assigned to the most menial tasks, that offered minimal opportunity for job advancement.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with Cipiana Rodriguez, Garden City, Kansas, January 13, 1987. Ms. Rodriguez's father was one of the first Mexicans to work and settle in the Garden City area in the early 1900s.
- <sup>17</sup> Daniel T. Simon, "Mexican Repatriation In East Chicago, Indiana," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, Vol. II, No. 2, (Summer, 1974), p.11.
- <sup>18</sup> *Generations United*, Kansas Humanities Council, Topeka, Kansas, March, 1994, p. 8. As a direct result of this sensational population growth, an estimated 300 Mexican communities of various sizes were flourishing in the Midwest by 1930. In Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma, about 70 Mexican settlements alone were clustered along the line of the Santa Fe Railroad.

- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Anthony "Tony" Navarro, Davenport, Iowa, June 23, 1986. Mr. Navarro is a long time resident of the Quad-Cities area and continues to remain active in various community organizations and activities. In Kansas, Mexican families settled in East Wellington, Northwest Fredonia, South Garden City, Southwest Hutchinson, South Wichita, Southeast Dodge City, South Horton, Southwest Newton, and Southwest Parsons. Elsewhere in the Middle West, there were Mexican communities in North Minneapolis, Southeast Albert Lea, and West St. Paul, Minnesota; South Milwaukee, East Waukesha, and South Racine, Wisconsin; West Gary, South South Bend, West Fort Wayne, and East Chicago, Indiana; West Sterling, East Aurora, West Moline, South Rockford, and West Silvis, Illinois; East Tulsa, Oklahoma; Southeast Scottsbluff, Nebraska; South Toledo and West Cleveland, Ohio; Southwest Davenport and West Des Moines, Iowa; and East Flint and Southwest Detroit, Michigan.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Ester Scobee, Wellington, Kansas, June 17, 1987. Ms. Scobee's relatives were one of the original families to settle in Wellington, Kansas. In addition, Ms. Scobee and her family have been active with the *fiestas* for years. Also, telephone interview with Frank Montez, Depue, Illinois, January 11, 1995. Mr. Montez noted that it was not uncommon for Mexican communities to have their own distinct name during the 1920s.
- <sup>21</sup> *Fiesta Brochure*, Fort Madison, Iowa, 1985. Also see Judith F. Laird, *Argentine, Kansas: The Evolution of a Mexican-American Community, 1905-1940*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1975; Ciro H. Sepúlveda, *La Colonia del Harbor: A History of Mexicans in East Chicago, Indiana, 1919-1932*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1976; and Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, "Chicanos in Chicago: A Brief History," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 1, 1975, pp. 22-32. Additional designations for Mexican communities in the Midwest during the 1920s and 1930s included The Flats, La Colonia, Smelter Hill, Las Lomas, Silver City, El Huarache, Little Chihuahua, Little Mexico, Cement Row, Mexican Village, Las Casitas, La Negra, La Garra, El Jardin, La Paz, West Bottoms, Santa Cruz, Goat Hill, McClue Flats, the Y, the Strand, La Hoyita, Holy City, Barrio Dogpatch, Sandtown, El Pozo, El Serape, Oakland, La Polvosa, Mexican Town, El Barrio Nuevo, The Q, The Bush, Steelton, and El Palomar. In addition to their distinct community names, many of these Mexican communities were geographically identified by certain streets and key intersections within the larger city.
- <sup>22</sup> Interviews with Eva Hernandez, Hutchinson, Kansas, January 23, 1987; Rosendo M. Terronez, Silvis, Illinois, June 21, 1986; Federico Herrera, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 11, 1986; and Ray Soltero, Kansas City, Missouri, March 30, 1995. All of these individuals shared common stories about sympathetic Anglos who assisted the Mexican community in many ways, despite negative reactions from their Anglo counterparts. Also see Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, *The Chicano Experience in Chicago: 1920-1970*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1976.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Jose Montes, Horton, Kansas, June 28, 1988. Mr. Montes was a key organizer in the Mexican community in Horton and was largely responsible for establish-

- ing a mutual-aid society and the fiestas in the early 1920s. Also see Stanley A. West, *The Mexican Aztec Society: A Mexican-American Voluntary Association in Diachronic Perspective*, Arno Press, New York, 1976, and Jose Amaro Hernandez, *Mutual Aid for Survival: The Case of the Mexican-American*, Krieger Publishing Company, Florida, 1983.
- <sup>24</sup> Interviews with Avelina Hernandez, Parsons, Kansas, March 8, 1987; Maria Flores, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 10, 1986; Gloria Alfaro, Hutchinson, Kansas, March 24, 1988; and Jesus (Jessica) Saucedo, Elgin, Illinois, April 15, 1987. All four of these women have been active for years with their respective churches. Also see Juan R. García and Angel Cal, "El Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José, 1925 to 1930," *Forging A Community: The Latino Experience in Northwest, Indiana, 1919-1975*, edited by James B. Lane and Edward Escobar, Cattails Press, 1987, pp. 95-114. Some of these women's religious groups were La Sociedad del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, La Sociedad Católica Mexicana, Las Hijas de María, La Sociedad Santa Cruz, La Sociedad de Damas de Guadalupe, Los Padres de Familias, Our Lady of Guadalupe Women's Club, Las Damas Católicas, Las Madres Católicas de Nuestra Señora, the Legion of Mary, and the Altar Rosary Society.
- <sup>25</sup> Interviews with Victoria Quintana, Parsons, Kansas, July 9, 1988, and Dora Falcon, Dodge City, Kansas, February 27, 1987. Both women noted that women have been active with various churches in the Midwest, and have been in the forefront for social justice. In addition, the author has collected dozens of photographs showing women dominating religious groups and conferences prior to the 1940s. Also see Allen Figueroa Deck, S.J., Gilbert M. Hinojosa, Michael J. McNally, and et. al., "Midwestern Catholicism and the Early Mexican Parishes, 1910-1930," *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*, edited by Jay P. Dolan and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, University of Notre Dame Press, 1993.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Petra Rodriguez, Dodge City, Kansas, June 24, 1988. Also see Robert Oppenheimer, "Acculturation or Assimilation: Mexican Immigrants in Kansas, 1900 to World War II," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, No. 4, October, 1985, pp. 429-448.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Leonarda Barretos, Dodge City, Kansas, June 24, 1988. Also see Ruth C. H. Crocker, "Sympathy and Science: The Settlement Movement in Gary and Indianapolis, 1889 to 1930," Ph.D. Dissertation, Purdue University, 1982, and Barbara Macklin, *Structural Stability and Change in a Mexican-American Community*, Arno Press, New York, 1974.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Micaela Chavez Calvillo, Hutchinson, Kansas, January 24, 1987. Some of the most active women's groups in the Midwest included La Sociedad Femenina Mexicana, La Sociedad Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez, La Sociedad Mutualista Hijas de México, El Club de Madres Mexicanas, El Club Femenil Aguiletas Aztecas, El Club Auxilar Femenil de La Unión Benito Juarez, La Femenil Tesoro Del Hogar, Las Hijas de Juarez, La Sociedad de Señoras y Señoritas, La Asociación Femenil Pro-México, and La

Brigada Cruz Azul. La Brigada Cruz Azul, for example, had chapters in communities throughout the Midwest, including Detroit, Chicago, East Chicago, Gary, Lorain, Ohio; and Hutchinson and Parsons, Kansas.

- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Jose Inez Santa Cruz, Fairmont City, Illinois, March 14, 1987.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with Froilan Aguinaga, Elgin, Illinois, April 14, 1987. Also see Paul L. Warnshius, "Crime and Criminal Justice Among Mexicans in Illinois," *National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement*, Report on Crime and the Foreign-Born by the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1931, and F. Arturo Rosales, "Mexicans, Interethnic Violence, and Crime in the Chicago Area During the 1920s and 1930s: The Struggle to Achieve Ethnic Consciousness," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, Vol. 2, 1989 *Mexicans in the Midwest*, Mexican American Studies & Research Center, The University of Arizona, pp. 59-97.
- <sup>31</sup> Interview with Josephine N. Paz, Waukegan, Illinois, April 13, 1987. Also interview with Julie (Macias) Cuellar, Newton, Kansas, June 18, 1987.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Russ Cuellar, Newton, Kansas, February 1, 1987. Also see Nicolas Kanellos, "Mexican Theater in a Midwestern City," *Latin American Theater Review*, Vol. 7, Fall, 1973, pp. 43-48.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Hazel Gomez, Topeka, Kansas, February 9, 1987. Also interviews with Grace Rivera, Rockford, Illinois, April 20, 1987, and Virginia (Rodriguez) Radford, Horton, Kansas, written correspondence dated February 9, 1995.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Luci C. Gajec, Detroit, Michigan, May 14, 1987. Also interviews with Alejandra Alcala, Topeka, Kansas, June 30, 1988, and Magdalena Mora, Chanute, Kansas, June 10, 1987. All three women have been long-time fiesta participants in their communities.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with Juanita Vasquez, East Chicago, Indiana, May 18, 1987. Also interviews with Linda de Leon, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Rita (Pompa) Camacho, Elgin, Illinois, April 13, 1987. These women have excellent knowledge regarding the rich history of Mexican music in their respective community.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview with Carol García Martinez, East Chicago, Indiana, May 18, 1987.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* *Harbor Lights*, p. 80.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview with Eva Hernandez, Hutchinson, Kansas, January 22, 1987. Also interview with Aurora Boyos, Chanute, Kansas, March 7, 1987. The fiestas in Chanute, Kansas can be traced prior to 1920. There is speculation that Chanute, Kansas may have sponsored the first fiesta in the Midwest.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with Mariano Placencia, Waukegan, Illinois, May 22, 1987.

- <sup>40</sup> Interview with Clementina Placencia, Waukegan, Illinois, May 22, 1987. In addition, it appears that some Mexican women worked in the shipyard industry in the Midwest. Carmen (Ortiz) Pérez, for example, worked at the Prairie Shipyard in Seneca, Illinois. She helped with the construction of LSTs (Long Ship Tanks) between May 1942 and June 1945. Telephone interview with her daughter, Mamie (Pérez) Guerra, Lake Forest, Illinois, October 5, 1995.
- <sup>41</sup> Interviews with Marge Villanueva Lambert, Lincoln, Nebraska, June 3, 1987; Gloria C. Fraire, East Chicago, Indiana, May 18, 1987, and Romana Acosta Sinclair, Kansas City, Missouri, May 27, 1988. Lambert served with the Women's Army Air Corp (WAAC) while both Fraire and Sinclair enlisted with the Women's Air Corps Service (WACS). Also, written correspondence with Virginia (Rodriguez) Radford, Horton, Kansas, December 19, 1994. Mrs. Radford worked in military intelligence during the war as a translator for the War Department. She was assigned to the Censorship Station located in San Antonio, Texas, translating materials arriving from Spanish-speaking nations.
- <sup>42</sup> Interview with Hazel Gomez, Topeka, Kansas, February 9, 1987. During the war, the fiestas, in many Mexican communities, were used to sell war bonds, to collect scrap metal, to write letters to servicemen and women overseas and at home, and to recruit volunteers for the local Red Cross chapter and civil defense teams.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Interview with Hazel Gomez.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview with Natalie Martinez, Sterling, Illinois, May 26, 1987. Also, interview with Ila Placencia, Des Moines, Iowa, June 17, 1986. Ms. Placencia lost two brothers during World War II.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview with Ester Beard, Ecorse, Michigan, May 16, 1987. A general review of the literature reveals only one book that discusses in detail Mexican American female defense workers. Sherna Gluck's study examines the lives of several Mexican American aircraft workers who were employed in the Los Angeles area. Gluck's book is entitled *Rosie The Riveter: Women, The War, and Social Change*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1987.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with Ermelinda G. Murillo, East Chicago, Indiana, October 16, 1987.
- <sup>47</sup> Interviews with Ben Franco, Omaha, Nebraska, August 18, 1985; Joe Terronez, Silvis, Illinois, June 21, 1986; Charles Sandoval, East Moline, Illinois, June 22, 1986; Felisa Ruiz, Kansas City, Missouri, February 24, 1987; Ventura Tellez, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, July 13, 1987; and Antonia Molina, Flint, Michigan, May 5, 1987. These individuals were active with the post-war civil rights movement for social and economic equality for Mexican Americans. Also see Raul Morin, *Among the Valiant: Mexican Americans in World War II and Korea*, Borden Publishing Company, Alhambra, California, 1966.
- <sup>48</sup> Interviews with Julia Padilla, Aurora, Illinois, April 25, 1987; Juanita Vasquez, East Chicago, Indiana, May 18, 1987; and I.C. Plaza, Omaha, Nebraska, June 16, 1986. These individuals were also active with several post-war organizations and activities promoting equal rights for the Mexican American community.

- <sup>49</sup> *Op. Cit.*, interview with Juana Caudillo. Also interviews with Jenny (Valenzuela) Beck and Natalie Martinez, Sterling, Illinois, May 26, 1987; G. Lupe Flores, Detroit, Michigan, May 15, 1987; and Felisa A. Terronez, Davenport, Iowa, written correspondence dated February 24, 1994.
- <sup>50</sup> Interview with Victoria Morales, Topeka, Kansas, February 11, 1987.
- <sup>51</sup> Interviews with Anthony "Tony" Navarro, Davenport, Iowa, June 20, 1986; and I.C. Plaza, Omaha, Nebraska, June 16, 1986. These two men noted that men eventually saw their political aspirations linked directly to a stronger voice for women at all aspects of community life.
- <sup>52</sup> A group interview with the Women of Soy, East Chicago, Indiana, May 18, 1987.
- <sup>53</sup> Interview with Ester Perez, East Chicago, Indiana, May 18, 1987. Many Mexican American women worked in both wars. For example, Margaret Rocha Bridges and Margaret Lopez Vargas of Davenport, Iowa, worked at the Rock Island Arsenal. In addition to defense work, a few Mexican American women served in the armed forces during the Korean War. Stella Sanchez of East Chicago, Indiana, for example served in the United States Air Corp. Her sister, Ann, had served in the WACS during World War II.
- <sup>54</sup> Interview with Maria Luz Corona, East Chicago, Indiana, August 16, 1986.
- <sup>55</sup> Ricardo Parra, Victor Rios, and Armando Gutierrez, "Chicano Organizations in the Midwest: Past, Present and Possibilities," *Aztlán*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1974. Also see Richard Santillán, "Latino Politics in the Midwest," *Latinos and the Political System*, edited by F. Chris García, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988. These new organizations included the Latin-American Veterans, Mexican American Servicemen's Association, Latin-American Social Clubs, Latin-American Association, Inc., United Betterment Club, Civic Councils for Mexicans, Latin-American Youth Clubs, Organization for Political Action, Latin Clubs, Mexican American Democratic Clubs, Mexican American Veterans, Latin American Democrats, Hispanic American Club, Our Lady of Guadalupe Club, Catholic War Veterans, Mexican G.I. Club, Kansas Civic Council, and La Asociación Educativa.
- <sup>56</sup> *Op. Cit.*, *Harbor Lights*, p. 67.
- <sup>57</sup> *Op. Cit.*, interview with I.C. Plaza.
- <sup>58</sup> Interview with Eva Hernandez, Hutchinson, Kansas, January 22, 1987. Also interview with Alejandra (Ollie) Zuniga, Saginaw, Michigan, May 7, 1987. Both women have a long history of leadership within the G.I. Forum.
- <sup>59</sup> Interviews with Dante Navarro, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 27, 1986; Jesse Villalpando, Griffith, Indiana, July 21, 1986; Perry García, Davenport, Iowa, June 21, 1986; and Eva Zavala, East Moline, Illinois, June 25, 1986.
- <sup>60</sup> Interview with Nancy "Rusty" Barcelo, Iowa City, Iowa, June 26, 1986. Ms. Barcelo is currently an administrator with the University of Iowa and has a great interest in the

history of Mexican American women in the Midwest.

- <sup>61</sup> *Op. Cit.*, interview with Eva Hernandez.
- <sup>62</sup> Interviews with Joseph Ramirez, Omaha, Nebraska, June 16, 1986; Dante Navarro, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 27, 1986; and Jesse Villalpando, Griffith, Indiana, July 21, 1986. All three of these individuals were active in the 1960 "Viva Kennedy" campaign in the Midwest.
- <sup>63</sup> *Op. Cit.*, interview with Eva Hernandez.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with Lydia Gonzales, Garden City, Kansas, January 19, 1987.
- <sup>65</sup> *Op. Cit.*, *Harbor Lights*, p. 34.
- <sup>66</sup> *Op. Cit.*, interview with Ester Beard.
- <sup>67</sup> *Op. Cit.*, interview with Eva Zavala.
- <sup>68</sup> Interview with John Sanchez, Kansas City, Missouri, February 27, 1990. Some of the civic groups in which women played key roles included the Westside Improvement Association of St. Paul; the East Topeka Civic Association; the Association for the Advancement of Latin Americans of Detroit; Latinas Unidas Para Acción de Toledo; the Mexican Civic Association of Dodge City; Latin Americans United for Progress of Holland (Michigan); Concerned Citizens Project of Silvis (Illinois); the Mexican American Council of Chicago; the Mexican American Citizens Club of Lorain (Ohio); United Mexican Americans of South Bend; La Voz of Parsons (Kansas); Council for the Spanish-Speaking of Milwaukee; Missouri Citizens for Democracy; and El Club Americano of Akron, Ohio.
- <sup>69</sup> Interview with Jenny Perales García, Omaha, Nebraska, June 2, 1987.
- <sup>70</sup> *Op. Cit.*, interview with Aurora Boyos.
- <sup>71</sup> Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation*, Canfield Press, San Francisco, 1972.
- <sup>72</sup> Interview with Patrick Velasquez, Omaha, Nebraska, June 16, 1986.
- <sup>73</sup> Interviews with Leticia Patino, Columbus, Ohio, September 1, 1985; Jose Trejo, St. Paul, Minnesota, July 1, 1986; Francisco Rodriguez, Madison, Wisconsin, July 7, 1986; Miguel Teran, Des Moines, Iowa, July 18, 1986; and Rudy Perales, Lincoln, Nebraska, August 17, 1985. All five individuals have served as executive directors of state commissions in each of their respective states. Also see Richard Santillán, "Latino Political Development in the Southwest and the Midwest Regions: A Comparative Overview, 1915-1989," *Latinos and Political Coalitions, Political Empowerment for the 1990s*, edited by Roberto E. Villarreal and Norma G. Hernandez, Greenwood Press, 1991.
- <sup>74</sup> Interviews with Olga Villa-Parra, South Bend, Indiana, August 30, 1985; Francis García, Hutchinson, Kansas, August 15, 1985; Laura Reyes Kopack, Detroit, Michigan, October 21, 1981; and Carmen E. Guerra, Kansas City, Missouri, February 27, 1987. These



women have been active in numerous political organizations and activities. García served, for example, as mayor of Hutchinson, Kansas, Villa-Parra served on the South Bend School Board, Guerra served as a Democratic committeewoman, and Reyes Kopack has been active within the Michigan Republican Party.

- <sup>75</sup> Interview with Paula Jasso, Topeka, Kansas, September 11, 1994. In the Kansas state election in 1994, Ms. Jasso ran for the office of Secretary of State, the first Mexican American to do so. Although she did not win the statewide seat, her campaign and vote total were impressive. Also see interviews with Maria Enrique, Flint, Michigan, May 11, 1987 and Lourdes Flores, East Chicago, Indiana, July 28, 1986. Both women have been active in women's issues and organizations for years. Some of the Midwestern community groups which have embodied the resurgence of the women's movement since the 1970's have included Adelante Mujer, Mujeres Unidas, Las Mujeres de la Esperanza, El Grupo de Mujeres Hispanas, Mujeres Latinas en Acción, the Mexican Ladies Association, the Mexican American National Association, the Mexican American Women's Business and Professional Club, La Asociacion Latina de Servicios Educativos, Mas Mujeres, the Hispanic Women's Network, the Hispanic Women's Forum, Comité de Las Damas, Club Norteño, Las Mujeres Unidas de Michigan, and the Alliance of Latin Women of Waukesha.
- <sup>76</sup> Interview with Hazel Gomez, Topeka, Kansas, September 9, 1994. Mrs. Gomez was very active serving the Mexican community during World War II and is currently involved with assisting senior citizens. Her husband, Robert, served in both World War II and Korea, and has been a long-time leader with the League of United Latin American Citizens in Kansas.

