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# **RE-ENVISIONING THE MEXICAN AMERICAN**

## **EXPERIENCE IN WORLD WAR II**

*A Local History of Sacramento & the Mexican American WWII Generation*

JUAN PABLO MERCADO

Re-envisioning the Mexican American Experience in World War II  
A Local History of Sacramento & the Mexican American WWII Generation

A Project

Presented to

The Faculty and the Department of Mexican American Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Juan Pablo Mercado

May 2011

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The Undersigned Project Advisors Approve the Project Titled  
RE-ENVISIONING THE MEXICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN WORLD WAR II

*A Local History of Sacramento & the Mexican American WWII Generation*

by

Juan Pablo Mercado

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

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## **ABSTRACT**

Traditional U.S. historical scholars, as a matter of practice, carelessly push the history of the Mexican American community to the fringes of the collective historical consciousness of this country by selecting the common stories that students of all races learn. This study examines the problem of insufficient and inadequate historical scholarship pertaining to people of Mexican ancestry of the United States. By providing a local history of Mexican Americans in the Sacramento Valley this project provides a challenge to the legacy of historical exclusion by documenting the contributions and experiences of the Mexican American World War II generation and provides an alternative historical perspective to the World War II narrative.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I set out to produce an academically rigorous historical study that would allow me to contribute to the field of Chicana and Chicano Studies. This project did not come without its obstacles and created some very challenging moments. However, there were many people who helped to guide me through this most critical time in my life. With that said there were many people who helped to contribute to this project and I would like to acknowledge them for their support; first and foremost I would like to thank all of the Mexican Americans of the World War II generation. This project is a tribute to the resolve, the dedication and the manner in which you have lived and continue to live your lives. To all of the participants in this project, especially the entire Unzueta *familia*: Petra, Cesario, Miguel and Robert, this project would not have happened without your support and willingness to share your stories. To Dr. Gregorio Mora Torres for his meticulous critiques and steadfast intellectual direction, thank you profe. To Dr. Julia Curry Rodríguez for her motivation, inspiration and unwavering support. ¡Muchisimas gracias profa! To XGC de San José, thank you for providing community and support, keep inspiring the next generation of Chicana and Chicano scholars. Lastly, a big thank you to the Mercado and Gutierrez families, they have provided significant support and inspiration for this work, probably more than they will ever know. This project is dedicated to the three beautiful, courageous and inspiring Chicanas: Eliza, Yolotli & Neca. I love you very much!

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## INTRODUCTION

Chicana and Chicano<sup>1</sup> communities in the United States have endured a historical legacy of exclusion. I define exclusion as the systematic process by which the dominant class ignores or distorts working-class, racial, and gender identity.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, controlling the historical consciousness of the society with the dominant group controlling and selecting the common stories that people of all races learn and that are essential to the creation of a collective historical consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Those who define history also define “truth”; by excluding the histories of minority communities in this country their histories and their truths are continuously being pushed to the fringes, if not omitted altogether from the collective historical narrative of the United States. This definition provides the framework by which I will examine and discuss the various manners in which Chicanas and Chicanos have been excluded from the collective historical consciousness of this country.

### SCOPE OF PROJECT

The scope of this project specifically encompasses the experiences and contributions of the Mexican American World War II generation. It is important to note that this is a particular historical focus that has been largely ignored by White historians; unfortunately it has had limited analysis by Chicana and Chicano scholars as well. In his book, *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*, Richard Griswold Del Castillo clearly challenges future scholars to take up the charge of investigating and documenting this watershed moment in United States History. He writes:

Despite the seeming importance of World War II and its impact on Mexican Americans, little attention has been devoted to these years and to how they shaped a new cultural and political

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<sup>1</sup> Chicana, Chicano, Mexican American & Latino are all terms used in this study that refer to people of Mexican ancestry in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Acuña, Rodolfo F. *Sometimes There is No Other Side: Chicanos and the Myth of Equality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 57.

<sup>3</sup> *Historical consciousness*: The manner in which history is understood, examined and explained.

environment for Mexican Americans. Only a few books have been published that specifically deal with the World War II experience of Mexican Americans.<sup>4</sup>

This project aims to address the void in scholarship that deals specifically with the historical analysis of the Mexican American World War II generation in the Sacramento Valley. By providing a thoughtful historical survey of the intersection between race, class and gender during the Second World War in the Sacramento Valley I will be able to examine the significant impact as well as document the many meaningful experiences that this generation has had on the Sacramento Valley during this critical historical period.

Although somewhat limited in selection, it should be noted that some Chicano historians have produced important scholarship on this period and have worked at addressing the blatant and egregious manner in which contemporary historical projects have ignored the significant impact that the Mexican American community played in the Second World War. Specifically, I wanted to acknowledge Emilio Zamora and his 2009 book, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas*. Zamora is unwavering in his effort to challenge the conscious exclusion of Mexicans within the history of this country and writes: "...researchers continue to edit Mexicans out of the U.S. history and that my work joins the larger effort to counter this trend."<sup>5</sup>

The following historical account aims to provide overwhelming evidence that not only were Mexican Americans active participants in the World War II era, but more importantly their contributions and experiences provide a unique and significant influence on the historical narrative of communities locally, nationally and internationally of the World War II generation.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Griswold del Castillo, *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Emilio Zamora, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), xiii.

## THE KEN BURNS AFFECT

According to the biography section on the PBS website for the film *The War*, Ken Burns has made documentary films for over three decades and has directed and produced some of the most acclaimed historical documentaries ever made.<sup>6</sup> Historian Stephen Ambrose also notes of Mr. Burns that most Americans get their history from him rather than any other source.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Burns has done documentaries on significant United States historical topics such as The Civil War, Baseball, Jazz, The United States Congress, The West and World War II.<sup>8</sup> Because Mr. Burns' films air on PBS, he has had, and continues to have a significant influence on teaching the general public about American history. With that said, the consistent manner in which Mr. Burns omits and distorts the contributions of Latinos, and in particular Mexican Americans, in his work is problematic.

In his 2007 film *The War* Mr. Burns provides a detailed account the World War II era by documenting personal accounts of four towns in the United States. One town in particular is Sacramento, California. After completion of the documentary Mr. Burns consciously choose to exclude all Latinos from his film. In his May 2007 column, New York Daily News writer Juan Gonzalez noted that after six years of preparation for the film and his almost forty profiles Mr. Burns has completely omitted Latinos from this part of United States history. Mr. Burns has and continues to inexplicably erase and/or minimize Latino contributions to American society on a regular basis. Gonzalez continues to cite glaring omissions and distortions in previous works (*Baseball* and *Jazz*) by Mr. Burns and infers that he is a serial eraser of Latinos.<sup>9</sup>

The omission of Latinos in his film *The War* created a furor within the Latino community and prompted a mass objection to the film. In a letter from Dr. Matt Garcia, Associate Professor of American

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<sup>6</sup> The War, About the Series, [http://www.pbs.org/thewar/about\\_ken\\_burns\\_bio.htm](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/about_ken_burns_bio.htm) (March 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ken Burns, <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/> (April 2011).

<sup>9</sup> NY Daily News, 11 May 2007.

Civilization, History, and Ethnic Studies at Brown University to Ken Burns dated February 2007, he pleads with Mr. Burns to correct his oversight regarding Mexican American contributions in World War II.

Dear Mr. Burns,

It has come to my attention that you intend to release your film about World War II— “The War”— without documenting the role of Latinos in the war effort. . . I want to appeal to you as a professional historian to correct this oversight. My area of research concerns people of Mexican heritage in the United States and I have documented the myriad ways this community influenced, and was influenced by, “the War” you aim to document. It was a major turning point in the formation of Mexican American civil rights consciousness and catalyzed a movement for those rights.<sup>10</sup>

In a speech by the Honorable Linda T. Sánchez of California in the United States House of Representatives in April 2007, Sánchez proclaims that the omissions of the contributions of Latinos during WWII are a painful reminder of the manner in which Latinos in this country are remembered historically.

Madam Speaker, I proudly join my colleagues today to pay tribute to the contributions of Latinos who served in our Armed Forces during World War II. As we were painfully reminded by the complete omission of Hispanics from a PBS documentary on World War II, the important contributions of Latinos, native born, as well as immigrants, are too often overlooked and forgotten.<sup>11</sup>

In a letter from The Defend the Honor Campaign to the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities dated July 2007, the letter states that Mr. Burns ‘purposefully and completely’ left out the contributions and experience of Latinos.

We assert that Mr. Burns stated that, "The series will celebrate American diversity, telling...of many different ethnic and racial backgrounds...at the same time acknowledging the difficult challenges faced by ethnic minorities in a segregated society." Page 33 of the grant document. The fact is that he deals only with three racial groups, whites, African Americans and Japanese Americans— he purposefully and completely left out Latinos, the only significant "ethnic" minority among the servicemen who served in WWII.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Matt Garcia, Associate Professor of American Civilization, History, and Ethnic Studies, Brown University to Ken Burns, 18 February 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Linda T. Sánchez, *Speech of Hon. Linda T. Sánchez of California in the House of Representatives*, Monday, 16 April 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Armando Rendón, Esq., for The Defend the Honor Campaign, to Bruce Cole, Chairman National Endowment for the Humanities, 27 July 2007.

Additionally, in a letter from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, (MALDEF) to the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) dated April 2007, MALDEF asserts that the airing of this film will only aid in the perpetuation of the consistent and conscious exclusion of Mexican Americans from United States history.

...MALDEF believes the production of a documentary that does not even mention the contributions of Latinos in WWII is offensive and shameful, especially in light of the fact that “educational materials” have been developed with this project. Allowing the Ken Burns documentary to run “as is” will further distort history. This gross error must be corrected prior to the airing or distribution of Mr. Burns’ documentary, regardless of the additional cost or time incurred. Failure to include contributions of Latinos would be yet another example of how history has ignored contributions made by real Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Mr. Burns has undoubtedly had a significant impact on how Americans are learning—or not learning about the history of minorities in this country.

With respect to Ken Burns, after complaints were first raised, he did offer to include Latino stories—produced by his own team, as an addendum to the film—but not to be incorporated within any of the existing material he had edited. When asked about the film and its obvious omissions Mr. Burns said that it was not intended to be a comprehensive history but rather he called it “a sort of epic poem and not a textbook.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Mr. Burns stated that there was absolutely no chance that the film would be re-edited. “It would be destructive, like trying to graft an arm onto your child,” he said. “It would destroy the film.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly Mr. Burns feels that producing a more inclusive and more importantly, a historically accurate film would require the destruction of his vision of the WWII narrative.

The cinematographic style that Mr. Burns uses on his films has become so popular that it is commonly referred to as the Ken Burns effect. It is a special effect that is frequently used in his historical

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<sup>13</sup> Ricardo Meza, Regional Counsel, MALDEF, to Paula Kerger, President & Chief Executive Officer, Public Broadcasting System, 9 April 2007.

<sup>14</sup> New York Times, 5 May 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

documentaries which pans across a still photograph by slowly zooming in on subjects of interest.<sup>16</sup> I posit that Mr. Burns is purposefully and consistently ignoring or distorting the contributions and experiences of Mexican Americans as subjects of interest and that this influence is working at constructing a flawed historical consciousness. I identify this influence as the *Ken Burns Affect*. This research is an opportunity to provide an alternative historical perspective to this watershed moment in history, not just Mexican American history but rather United States history. The problem that my specific research works to challenge is that of a legacy of exclusion within United States history; it is an opportunity to affect historical consciousness.

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<sup>16</sup> Knight Digital Media Center, <http://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/imovie/photos-kenburns/> (April 2011).

## **CHAPTER I**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

People of Mexican ancestry living in the United States have consistently been omitted and distorted from the history of this country. Scholarship that is produced and continues to be produced is constructed through an inherently flawed methodology. Knowledge is being transmitted to generations of students of all races that privileges White Americans of European ancestry. Additionally, the scholarship pertaining to women of Mexican ancestry, if written at all, has proved to be just as flawed and just as distorted. The following chapter is an examination of scholarship that addresses these themes and aims to challenge the traditional legacy of historical exclusion.

#### MEXICANS AND TRADITIONAL UNITED STATES HISTORY

In his book *A Different Mirror*, Ronald Takaki opens with a very poignant story that illustrates just how much the history of non-white, non-European peoples have been ignored from the mainstream American historical narrative, Takaki writes:

I had flown from San Francisco to Norfolk and was riding in a taxi to my hotel to attend a conference on multiculturalism. Hundreds of educators from across the country were meeting to discuss the need for greater cultural diversity in the curriculum. My driver and I chatted about the weather and tourists. The sky was cloudy, and Virginia Beach was twenty minutes away. The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. "How long have you been in this country?" he asked. "All my life," I replied, wincing. "I was born in the United States." With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: "I was wondering because your English is excellent!" Then, as I had many times before, I explained: "My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880's. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years." He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look "American" to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the consistent and systematic erasure of the experiences and contributions of minorities within the United States most Americans are not aware, and thus inconsiderate, of the historical presence of non-

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 1.



White people in America. Specifically, when discussing the history of Mexicans in the United States one can point to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as a watershed moment. In 1848, not only did Mexico lose approximately one half of its land to the United States, the Mexican people also experienced a loss of legal, economic and political power. At the treaty negotiations, the Mexican representatives pressed hard for two particular articles—Article IX granted full citizenship rights to the Mexicans residing in the ceded territory and Article X that recognized the Spanish and Mexican land grants as valid.<sup>18</sup> Neither of these obligations was enforced by the United States and this led to significant losses of land, money and political participation by Mexicans living in the Southwest. These key losses led directly to the exclusion of Mexicans in all facets of society and swiftly pushed this population of peoples to the margins of the American historical consciousness.

Chicano historian David Gutiérrez writes that the legacy of American expansion into Mexican lands has had a lasting and significant impact on the American historical consciousness not just because of the land and resources that it acquired but also because Anglo Americans were allowed to produce the common stories that explained this historical phenomena.

The United States' penetration and conquest of Mexican territory was, of course, important, but . . . this represented only the first step in American expansion. Ultimately, the critical aspect of the annexation of the West proved to be the power that conquest bestowed on Americans to explain what had occurred there.<sup>19</sup>

Because of the Mexican American War, Anglo-American scholars were provided the luxury of excluding, distorting or exaggerating the stories that ultimately went on to form the historical consciousness regarding this period in history and the people involved.

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<sup>18</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of the Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 311.

<sup>19</sup> David Gutiérrez, "Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West" *Western Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 24, No.4 (Nov. 1993): 522.

Anglo American social scientists have compounded the problem of exclusion by incorrectly and inadequately documenting and examining race with respect to the history of the United States. In his book *Racial Fault Lines*, Tomás Almaguer specifically explains the manner in which race has served as the central organizing principle of group life in the southwest during the latter period of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Almaguer posits the idea that race and the racializing process was in fact the most significant factor in creating, extending and preserving the social positioning of Europeans, while simultaneously excluding and subjugating non-Europeans.<sup>21</sup> This is a significant point, one that distinguishes Almaguer's analysis from the dominant discourse of traditional historical scholars, in that he astutely examines the problem from a non-binary lens. Historically, in the United States, race has been discussed from a black/white perspective. However, when considering the ethnic composition of the Southwest, it would be inaccurate to apply this perspective to Mexicans. The sentiments of noted Chicano historian Juan Gómez-Quiñones also imply that this is flawed mode of analysis as he suggests that the common black-white paradigm is an inaccurate manner by which to examine both ethnic and class specifics in the United States. It ignores and limits the presence and progress of the Mexican population.<sup>22</sup>

Particular theories of race shape our understanding and definition of racial problems. The most common and powerful theory of race in the United States is the Black/White binary. This paradigm is defined as the idea that race in America consists, exclusively or primarily, of only two racial groups, the

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<sup>20</sup> Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 205.

<sup>21</sup> Tomás Almaguer In *Racial Fault Lines* (205), discusses this as the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings.

<sup>22</sup> Juan Gómez-Quiñones, forward in Zamora, Emilio, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas*, ix.

Black and the White<sup>23</sup>. All too often scholars reproduce this paradigm when they write as though only the Black and the White races matter for purposes of discussing race and social policy.<sup>24</sup> The common and misguided inclusion of “other people of color,” without careful attention to their voices, their experiences and their histories is a reinforcement of the Black/White paradigm.<sup>25</sup> The paradigm mandates that racial identities and groups in the United States are best examined and understood through the Black/White binary.<sup>26</sup> Because the Black/White binary paradigm is so commonly accepted, other racialized groups like Latinos/as, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are routinely marginalized, disregarded or omitted altogether.<sup>27</sup>

The Southwest has always had a multiethnic population that has to be considered on many different levels. Tomás Almaguer continues to note:

The historical materials documenting the racialized patterns of group inequality and conflict that unfolded in nineteenth century California do not support an analytical framing based on the Black/White binary relationship forged elsewhere in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

If the manner by which social scientists interpret, understand and make sense of their world is rooted in an inherently limited and flawed account of history, then what we can expect is a limited and flawed construction of a collective historical consciousness. That is to say that an unacknowledged or limited analysis of racism and discrimination throughout this country’s history provides a foundation that helps to reinforce a commonly distorted view of United States history.

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<sup>23</sup> Juan F. Perea, *The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The "Normal Science" of American Racial Thought*. California Law Review Vol. 85, No. 5, LatCrit: Latinas/os and the Law: A Joint Symposium by "California Law Review" and "La Raza Law Journal" (Oct., 1997), pp. 1213-1258

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Acuña, Rodolfo F. *Sometimes There is No Other Side*, 206.

Throughout history, institutions within the United States have been notorious for not only excluding marginalized peoples, but also for creating the structures by which this exclusion could be maintained. Race and racializing discourses served as systems to create, extend, and preserve social positioning in the period in which White supremacy was being systematically institutionalized.<sup>29</sup> Western scholarship production along with mainstream Anglo American social scientists, have worked to maintain in principle, and in practice, this historical legacy of exclusion. To Rodolfo Acuña the *American paradigm*

encompasses the values, culture, and beliefs of a society, and forms the basis for the methodology and theory through which society is interpreted. Specifically, loyalty to government and Western civilization, and a core of beliefs shared by the dominant class of Euro-Americans about the superiority of their civilization and culture.<sup>30</sup>

This idea is then transmitted to generations of students through inadequate scholarship and works at shaping their ideology in a flawed manner. By restricting the knowledge of Mexicans in this country, options are restricted and what results is a limited, and all too often flawed, historical consciousness.<sup>31</sup> This means that if the knowledge that pertains to Mexicans in the United States is marginalized, distorted or excluded, the prospects that students can understand the historical struggles of their communities will be limited. Moreover, it is imperative to strike down the idea that institutions such as the academy are completely just and treat everyone on an equal basis. The notion that the academy or this country is or strives to be color-blind must be demythicized.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, if the intentional and consistent message that all students hear and that scholarship reproduces is a Eurocentric message, it begins to have a significant and detrimental effect on future

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<sup>29</sup> Acuña, *Sometimes There is No Other Side* 3.

<sup>30</sup> Acuña, *Sometimes There is No Other Side*, viii.

<sup>31</sup> Acuña, *Sometimes There is No Other Side*, 95

<sup>32</sup> Acuña, *Sometimes There is No Other Side*, xi

generations of students and scholars. This message reinforces negative attributes to communities of color because the stories of the significant contributions, resistance and struggle by people of color are intentionally distorted or omitted. This historical distortion and exclusion leads to a false sense of historical consciousness by future generations of scholars and their students. The idea must change. It must illustrate how the American paradigm mythicizes history and works as a form of social control, producing the glass ceiling that keeps minorities in their places.<sup>33</sup>

With particular regards to scholarship production, the manner in which mainstream knowledge is produced tends to embody certain fundamental aspects of the American paradigm. For a significant amount of traditional American scholars, truth is that carefully schooled idea that middle-class professionals define as *accepted* knowledge.<sup>34</sup> The study of social sciences in the United States is decided by a small group of scholars who define what is the proper subject of inquiry and what qualifies as scholarship.<sup>35</sup> This small number of scholars embraces and endorses the *truths* of Eurocentrism. The ideas of Octavio Romano move beyond simply suggesting that Mexican Americans are distorted and omitted from history, he states:

Social science studies have dealt with Mexican-Americans as an ahistorical people — with a place in history reserved for them only when they undergo some metamorphosis usually called acculturation. As a consequence, Mexican-Americans are never seen as participants in history, much less as generators of the historical process.<sup>36</sup>

Romano posits the idea that white scholars have come to the understanding that Mexican Americans do not generate history and are simply a background not to be included with any sort of significance, and only included, to a minimal degree when they have grasped certain basic tools that allows them to be

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Acuña, *Sometimes There is No Other Side*, vii.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Octavio Ignacio Romano-V., "The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican-Americans: The Distortion of Mexican-American History" *Voices Readings from El Grito 1967-1973*. (Berkeley: Qunito Sol, 1973): 43-44.

incorporated into Anglo culture. This conclusion is unconceivable, yet clearly evident in the historical scholarship that has been, and is regularly being produced within the academy.

When I first started out gathering materials for this project I came across a book called *The Library of Congress World War II Companion*, I thought I had hit the mother load. The book contained close to one thousand pages of text, a comprehensive index and claimed that this text will be central to anyone who desired to understand the World War II era and its enduring reverberations.<sup>37</sup> After a close examination of the book, the claim was true. It did prove to be indispensable for me in understanding the continuing reverberations of this era; unfortunately the reverberations were a reinforcement of the distorted and negative historiography of traditional historical scholarship. The book includes a chapter titled “War on the Home Front” with a sub-section titled “Labor.” In this part of the book it includes a scant two sentences about the Bracero program. Additionally, it characterizes the tension between Anglo and Mexican Americans during the era brought on by living and employment conditions in the following manner:

Gangs of young Mexicans who wore zoot suits... were subject to police harassment and sometimes also attacked Anglos in the armed forces. In Los Angeles in June 1943, a “zoot suit riot” broke out when, with police looking on, sailors who said they had been assaulted beat Mexican Americans.<sup>38</sup>

Our collective memory of World War II shapes the cultural formation of our identity as Americans — who we are and what this country stands for. However, the manner in which we are remembering the past is so obviously distorted. History is our way of remembering what happened, directly through personal stories and indirectly through historical scholarship. With respect to this historical period, who’s history are we

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<sup>37</sup> Margret E. Wagner, Linda Barrett Osborne, Susan Reyburn, and Staff of the Library of Congress. *The Library of Congress World War II Companion*, Edited by David M. Kennedy. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Wagner, 855.

remembering?<sup>39</sup> More often than not it is the story of American men of European ancestry that gets passed on from one generation to the next, constructed as the collective history of the United States.

#### CONSCIOUSLY SHIFTING THE SCHOLARSHIP

Through the examination of particular oral histories from Mexican American women of the World War II era, challenges to traditional narratives during this significant period in history surface. These alternative accounts of history create a space to examine non-traditional theories about women and gender roles. A close examination of women's individual stories illuminates how social change and shifts in race and gender consciousness occur, and it uncovers the nuances and intricacies of women's personal and distinct experiences.<sup>40</sup> Brenda Sendejo is able to bring to light a significant theme of opportunity for Mexican women during the war years. Opportunity came in the form of work, Mexican American women were eager and motivated to step up as part of the budding labor force that needed to take on the home front responsibilities. They served in all aspects of the war effort including military service, sponsoring local community campaigns and supporting the national cause for increased production.<sup>41</sup> Opportunity also manifested itself through the ability to engage with, and challenge traditional roles of gender and status, as example from one excerpt of the oral histories a Mexican American women credited her views on equal rights for Mexicans and women to her life-changing experience as a worker during war years. These stories are evidence that this significant historical moment in the early 1940's was pivotal to her personal development and that her experiences unquestionably influenced her sense of gender and ethnic identity

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<sup>39</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 4.

<sup>40</sup> Brenda Sendejo, *Mother's legacy* in Rivas-Rodriguez, Maggie and Emilio Zamora, ed., *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) 158.

<sup>41</sup> Sendejo, 160.

as well as her formation of a feminist consciousness.<sup>42</sup> Because of the expanded opportunity to work outside the home women now had an increased participation in defining their social roles and taking an active part in social advancement.

Perhaps the most significant observation in this case study is the philosophical shift that these women made with regards to their daughters. The wartime experiences provided an opportunity for women to raise their daughters with an alternative set of ethics, notably different from how they themselves had been raised.<sup>43</sup> Because of their expanded social role they seized the opportunity shift the consciousness of their future generations. "...They afforded their daughters and granddaughters a new form of feminist consciousness as they demonstrated new heights of self-sufficiency and independence. This shift in consciousness shaped the lives of future family generations and their communities."<sup>44</sup> The legacy that these women left for their children has had a far-reaching influence over many generations. Contemporary generations of Chicanas point to and regard the contributions of their mothers and grandmothers as fundamentally significant in the construction of their consciousness. Young women pointed to their mothers to an even greater extent, signifying that the fundamental shift into their own world as politically conscious Chicana women would not have taken place if not for the similarly meaningful experiences of their mothers. The understanding of this collective historical shift strengthens their bond and illustrates just how much Mexican women have created a legacy as agents of history and culture.<sup>45</sup>

#### WOMEN AND WORKING CONDITIONS

With regards to women, in particular Chicana women, and working conditions, very few pieces of scholarship exist. For whatever reasons, only limited amounts of research have focused on providing a

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<sup>42</sup> Sendejo, 169.

<sup>43</sup> Sendejo, 159.

<sup>44</sup> Sendejo, 156.

<sup>45</sup> Sendejo, 177.



deeper understanding of women in the workforce and working conditions. By including the seminal work of Patricia Zavella, this project provides an example of groundbreaking scholarship that challenges not only traditional interpretations but that also examines the internal contradictions within the discipline of Chicano/a studies. Additionally it allows for a more grounded examination of Mexican women workers during the Second World War. In particular Zavella examines "...the linkages between Chicano family life and gender inequality in the labor market."<sup>46</sup> Because of the level of participation that Mexican American women experienced in the labor force during the war years it is essential to examine the relationship that these experiences had with regards to the family dynamic. Zavella uses a "...socialist feminist lens, filtered by a concern with racial inequality, that opens up a field of vision with which to understand the lives of Chicana workers."<sup>47</sup> Zavella is able to challenge the discipline because within traditional Chicano scholarship there has been no separation between family and women, the women has traditionally been examined through the concept of family. Making the distinction between family and women pushes the scholarship to a place that allows for an alternative examination of the particular interconnections between women's work and family. Zavella notes that revisionist ideas surrounding Chicano families have omitted women in the work force while her work aims to provide an alternative view that links the work of Chicanas and family lives.<sup>48</sup>

The ideology of family is central to this analysis. Zavella looks at the concept of family ideology in relationship to women and the constraints surrounding women workers. "Family ideology—the assumption about proper men's and women's roles—most often supports the segregation of women in the labor

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<sup>46</sup> Zavella, Patricia, *Women's Work & Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987) xii.

<sup>47</sup> Zavella, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Zavella, 2-3.

market.”<sup>49</sup> She surmises that because of this ideology women workers are prime prospects for occupational segregation. Women have to deal with the traditional responsibilities of their role within the family while trying to create a space in the labor market, a space that is often layered with segregation and discrimination. “Family ideology serves dual purposes: It masks women’s multiple statuses by defining women as secondary workers—women who work to supplement family income—and it rationalizes women’s subordination in the labor force since women perform ‘women’s work.’ At the same time, housework is devalued as not being ‘work,’ and thus the double day of women is discounted.”<sup>50</sup> The family ideology serves as a convenient explanation for subjugating the women worker.

By introducing this analysis, a closer look at the challenges and limitations that women workers of the World War II generation faced is revealed. Additionally, a deeper understanding of how women process and address the issues of work and family is developed. By connecting the shifting conditions of women’s work with changes in the families, we come to understand the meaning women attribute to their total life conditions.<sup>51</sup> This understanding assists in interpreting the experiences that Naomi Quiñonez provides in her scholarship. Quiñonez documents the work experiences of Mexican American women during the war years and the shift in consciousness that resulted from these experiences.

These experiences not only allowed them to see themselves in a new light but also made them readjust their expectations of men. Many changed their ideas... about marriage and family, which transformed previous notions of gender roles. Their ability to transcend fear or guilt about cultivating personal independence shows how many Mexican American women of the war period were dismantling older social constructions and reconstructing their own...<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Zavella, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Zavella, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Zavella, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Quiñonez, Naomi, *Rosita The Riveter* in Rivas-Rodriguez, Maggie, ed., *Mexican Americans and World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) 267.

Quiñonez specifically focuses on two major themes, first looking at the working conditions of Mexican American women. Quiñonez describes a wartime labor market that was eagerly inviting, and actively recruiting the whole nation to join in the war effort. "...Mexican American men entered the service with no hesitation, and women entered the labor market to discover that, for the first time, they could obtain higher-skilled jobs for much higher wages than they had ever previously earned."<sup>53</sup> Although the jobs that were being offered provided an opportunity that had historically been denied to most Mexican American women the fervor during the war did not eliminate racial discrimination.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Mexican American women still faced daunting acts of discrimination and difficult working conditions. Defense sector jobs throughout the country paid women less than men and by manipulating job titles to reflect less than their workload; employers could justify this illicit practice.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the sexism that was prevalent throughout this period not only caused a mental or emotional threat to women; it also caused a physical threat.

Women were often pressured into maintaining a glamorous and feminine image, even at the risk of work-site safety...However for many women, maintaining a glamorous and feminine image often left them vulnerable to the hostility of male blue-collar workers, subjected constantly to catcalls and the general disrespect that typified male sexism.<sup>56</sup>

Mexican American women had to face difficult social challenges in order to attain a certain level of economic and social mobility that the war time economy provided them.

Quiñonez goes on to discuss the theme of independence, and just how much the employment opportunity provided a way for Mexican American women to gain independence for themselves and for their families. This new brand of independence that Mexican American women workers felt was essential in

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<sup>53</sup> Quiñonez, 249.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Quiñonez, 248.

understanding the development of their social agency. Even within the most repressive social frameworks they were able to create strategies of survival for themselves and their families.<sup>57</sup> Having experienced higher wages, more social freedoms, and the ability to contribute at a level previously only open to men, Mexican American women were able to develop a consciousness that broke away from the traditional norms and interpretations of who they were and what their role in society was. Women demanded increases in social and economic mobility brought about by their wartime experience. These experiences gave many Mexican American women 'cultural permission' to look beyond their traditional roles and found new ways to explain their experiences and ideas to the world.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Quiñonez, 250.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

### **SACRAMENTO DURING THE WAR YEARS**

During the World War II era Sacramento proved to be a dynamic region in the United States. The economy was spurred by an increase in the agriculture sector, the defense industry and the canning and processing sectors. The regional economy boomed and all three of these sectors played an integral part in this boom. Mexican Americans also shared credit for this boom for they played a central role in filling the labor shortage that allowed for the local economy to swell. The presence of Mexicans in the Sacramento region did not occur all of a sudden and in fact they had a rich and storied tradition in the region well before the 1940's. Although the population statistics might seem low, World War II did in fact, provided the impetus for the Mexican American population of Sacramento to grow.

#### SACRAMENTO IN THE WWII ERA

During the World War II era, the economy of Sacramento was very well defined, and the major industries of the valley played a prominent role during the Second World War. The first was agriculture, including crop production and the processing of fruits and vegetables. The second was a wide variety of local and state government jobs; lastly, was the railway transportation and train repair industry.<sup>59</sup> These activities directly accounted for close to one-third of the total employment in the region and more than ninety percent of the basic employment.<sup>60</sup> Specifically in the 1940s, the agriculture sector accounted for nearly twenty percent of the total employment in Sacramento.<sup>61</sup> As the capital of California, Sacramento

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<sup>59</sup> Richard S. Peterson, "Growth of Sacramento County, 1940-1970." (Economics Department, Bank of America N.T. and S.A., 1961) 5.

<sup>60</sup> Peterson, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Peterson, 9.

was influential as a political hub in 1940s, however, its function as a primary center for the processing and distribution of produce of the bountiful agricultural region was also an impressive feature of its economy.<sup>62</sup>

California has been a top producer of agriculture and food in this country since the 1940's. The Sacramento Valley has been integral helping the state maintain this moniker of top producer. During the 1940's well over 350 crops were grown for production in California, with over half the country's nuts, fruits and vegetables coming from the state. Major products included: alfalfa, apples, avocados, barley, broccoli, carrots, celery, citrus fruits, cotton, flowers, garlic, grapes, greenhouse plants, lettuce, maize, melons, rice, strawberries and tomatoes.<sup>63</sup> In the Sacramento Valley the main agricultural crops were lettuce, grapes, tomatoes, strawberries and asparagus.

When it was time for Sacramento to get involved with the war effort it was clear what would be expected from this region of the golden state. With the large demand for food stimulated by the war effort, the valley's farmers went to work producing crops.<sup>64</sup> The Sacramento Valley received contracts to manufacture \$7,500,00 worth of wartime goods. Most of the funds went for preserved food products, such as canned fruit and vegetables, beet sugar, olive oil and flour, Sacramento County alone had contracts totaling \$1,700,000.<sup>65</sup> From 1941 to 1945, the price of fruit increased by a factor of three, for feed, grain and hay it almost doubled and dairy products surged by almost by fifty percent.<sup>66</sup> The value of rice was an excellent illustration of the price increases during this time as well "...it went from \$1.53 a hundred pounds in 1940 to \$3.74 in 1945 and \$6.13 in 1947."<sup>67</sup> Because of the great demand for specific crops

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<sup>62</sup> Peterson, 6.

<sup>63</sup> *California Agricultural Statistics Service*, <http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/Statistics/> (March 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Joseph A. McGowan *History of the Sacramento Valley*. Vol. II. (New York and West Palm Beach: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1961) 320.

<sup>65</sup> McGowan, 321.

<sup>66</sup> McGowan, 320.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

the wartime economy was able to create a shift in crop patterns of the valley, with particular regard to rice for example, Sutter County increased its rice acreage from 19,000 to 42,000.<sup>68</sup> Not only did the war effort call for the region's great agricultural resources it also brought about a significant expansion of the military installations throughout the Sacramento Valley.

McClellan Air Field broke ground in 1936, but its history dates back to Rockwell Field, located near San Diego, nearly two decades earlier. McClellan was established to address some of the inadequacies with Rockwell that became apparent following World War I.<sup>69</sup> The McClellan Field site was selected after Congress appropriated seven million dollars for an Air Corps repair depot near Sacramento on May 7, 1936.<sup>70</sup> Due to the demands of World War II, shortly after the depot was established, it increased its size and it stepped up its activity. The full throttle war mobilization effort brought thousands of new and eager employees to McClellan Air Field's and increased its ability make repairs and get planes back to their units.<sup>71</sup> Not only was the air base charged with repairing planes, it was also responsible for training the many thousands of civilian workers to repair various types of aircrafts. The mission of training personnel at McClellan Field to support repair facilities in the Pacific was so significant that within a month of its wartime mobilization, the depot hired an additional 2,500 employees.<sup>72</sup>

Initially working conditions at McClellan were very stressful. The air base's military and civilian workers found themselves under great pressure, working at maximum effort preparing for an anticipated attack by Japan.<sup>73</sup> Because of the requirements of the job, the fast-paced nature to complete the tasks

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> McGowan, 317.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Kyle Byard and Tom Naiman, *Images of America McClellan Air Force Base* (San Francisco, CA: Arcadia Publishing, 2007) 31.

<sup>72</sup> Byard and Naiman, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

and the significance of the over-all demand of wartime labor, the atmosphere was pretty intense. Immediately, McClellan was operational 24 hours a day in order to keep up with the demands of the ever-expanding war effort. The fear that the West Coast would be the next target of the Japanese compelled McClellan to routinely operate under blackout conditions.<sup>74</sup> The workload at the air base did not slow down; from March to May 1943 more than 225 aircraft were shipped to the Pacific fleet. The population at McClellan expanded to over 17,500 civilian and 4,200 military personnel.<sup>75</sup>

Not until the final stages of the war did McClellan begin to transition into non-wartime mode. However, the base continued to receive and repair thousands of aircrafts such as P-38 Lightning's, P-39 Aircobras, P-40 Warhawks, P-51 Mustangs, C-47 Skytrain cargo planes, and B-17 bombers.<sup>76</sup> The base had served as flagship of the U.S. armed forces and its logistical precision. McClellan was pivotal in supplying, repairing, and modifying aircraft to keep pace with the heavy demands that were essential to victory.<sup>77</sup> By 1944, over twenty-eight million dollars had been expended at the base, indicting the extent and significance of operations.<sup>78</sup>

At its height McClellan employed well over 17,000 civilian personnel during the Second World War, it slowly decreased its workforce until the end of the war, however by 1950 it was booming again, employing close to 18,000 civilian workers.<sup>79</sup> Because of its high level of local employment and its consistent demand for labor McClellan AFB had a long-lasting and positive economic affect on the local Sacramento economy.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Byard and Naiman, 31.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> McGowan, 318.

<sup>79</sup> Byard and Naiman, 61.



Mather Air Force Base, located just 12 miles east of the city of Sacramento, opened in 1918 as a World War I pilot training school, but after the First World War it was used as a local terminal for aerial forest patrol and airmail service.<sup>80</sup> In 1935 a congressional bill reactivated Mather,<sup>81</sup> and in April of 1941 Mather was redesigned as a navigational school and was used throughout the war to train thousands of navigators.<sup>82</sup> When the war began Mather noticed a significant shift, it became one of the busiest and most important training centers on the West Coast.<sup>83</sup> The base featured a pilot instructor's school, advanced two-engine and B-52 transition schools, B-52 mechanic school and aircrew training school.<sup>84</sup> More significantly, Mather featured the first and the largest navigation school in the West.<sup>85</sup> As the war neared an end the base transitioned into filling the different needs of the armed forces on the Pacific front.

In 1944 Mather's mission changed again, it was controlled by the Air Transport Command and mainly used as a receiving local for troops and supplies on there way to the Pacific.<sup>86</sup> Once the war was over it became the central hub for the famous *Sunset Project*, and the base became known as *first stop, U.S.A.* for aircraft and men traveling home from the Pacific.<sup>87</sup> In 1946 after a study by the United States Air Force Mather was selected as the location of the Air Force's USAF Bombardment School. The idea for the school was a new concept with regards to aerial training, but one that filled an existing and significant need. The air base was selected ahead of eight other sites.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Mather Air Force Base, *History of Mather Air Force Base* Fact Sheet No.2 (Sacramento: Office of Information, Mather Air Force Base, 1964) 1.

<sup>81</sup> McGowan, 318.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Sacramento Union*, 18 March, 1951.

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

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

In May of 1948, over 3,400 military personnel stationed at Mather AFB made close to \$500,000 in monthly salary. Additionally, a seven hundred-unit housing project was being constructed on the base as well.<sup>89</sup> Both during and after the war Mather was integrating itself economically into the region. Over seven hundred civilians were employed at the base in 1948. These seven hundred civilians were responsible for close to seventy-five percent of the bases supply work.<sup>90</sup> Mather was a significant source of economic stability for the economy of Sacramento during this era. Not only was it supplying hundreds of well paying jobs for civilians but also the type of work they were doing projected an economic plan that Sacramentans could count on for years to come.

Just South of Sacramento, the third big valley air base, now known as Travis Field, was started in April 1942. Immediately after Pearl Harbor the charge of the Air Force was the aerial defense of the Pacific Coast, and thus it requested a new air base in the vicinity of Fairfield.<sup>91</sup> The primary function of the base was to service planes headed to the Pacific theater of war. More than two thousand aircraft were prepared for their overseas trips between the summer of 1943 and the fall 1944 when this duty was shifted to Mather Field just north of Fairfield.<sup>92</sup> When the war ended the base became a center for crews returning from the Pacific, and the departure point for military personnel flying overseas. Five trans-Pacific flights arrived and departed daily, with close to three thousand passengers arriving and departing overseas monthly.<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, Travis eased the burden of both McClellan and Mather by providing a third airfield in the region that would be available to take on any additional work or repairs. Although the defense sector

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<sup>89</sup> *Sacramento Union*, 18 March 1951.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> McGowan, 318. or *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> McGowan, 318. or *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> McGowan, 318-319.

had a significant presence in the region the agriculture industry, especially the canneries in Sacramento provided additional resources during the World War II era.

Drawn by the diversity in agricultural jobs in the region, many Mexicans came to Sacramento and found work in the local canneries. During the 1940's Mexicans made up close to fifty percent of all cannery workers in Sacramento.<sup>94</sup> Canneries such as, Libby, McNeill and Libby and Bercut-Richards were all prominent canneries in Sacramento processing and packing all sorts of fruits and vegetables such as tomatoes, pears and asparagus. During the 1920's through the end of World War II, the Libby cannery had a 250,000-square-foot cannery building and employed as many as nineteen hundred workers at its peak.<sup>95</sup> Libby appealed to women workers, in particular, because of its more than fifty on-site employee cottages and a fully operating day care facility.

Another prominent and very successful cannery of Sacramento was the 52-acre Bercut-Richards Packing Co., established in 1931, near the American River levee at North 7th Street and Richards Boulevard. The cannery began in the 1920's through a failed tomato cannery operated by Peter and Henri Bercut, but was later reopened in 1932 by the Theodore H. Richards. In 1949 Bercut-Richards packed 2.4 million cases of produce and distributed it nation wide.<sup>96</sup> The Del Monte Corp. also left its mark on Sacramento's canning history. Opened in 1925 the 2-square-block cannery plant gained worldwide recognition through its large canning production of pears, peaches, tomatoes, spinach, pumpkin, beets, carrots and squash.<sup>97</sup> In recognition of the significant history of canneries in Sacramento, Mayor Clarence L. Azevedo proclaimed June 18, 1958 as Canning Industry Day in Sacramento. During a special ceremony the

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<sup>94</sup> Steven M. Avella, *Capital City: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of Sacramento, 1850-2000*, Urban West Cities Series (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 108.

<sup>95</sup> *Sacramento Union*, 9 May 2008

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

mayor was presented a memorial marker to commemorate the state's first inland cannery, a salmon cannery, across the river from Sacramento's K Street.<sup>98</sup>

#### MEXICANS IN SACRAMENTO

Since the founding of the city, and much earlier than that, Mexicans have always had a definite presence in the Sacramento valley, however the ability to precisely count the population within in the region has always presented historians and demographers with significant problems. Counting the number of Mexicans in the City of Sacramento before the 1900's is a bit problematic. Spanish-speaking residents did live in Sacramento from its earliest days, many as miners from the Mexican state of Sonora who settled in the city after working in the gold mines of the Sierra Mountains. While others where here well before the Gold Rush of 1849 and ranched and farmed in outlying areas of the Sacramento Valley.<sup>99</sup> The Mexican Revolution of 1910 accelerated the flow of immigrants, and by the 1920's California became a prime destination for Mexicans. Counties south of the Tehachapi Mountains experienced sharp increases in their Mexican populations, with Los Angeles County experiencing the most significant growth. However, a significant amount of Mexican migrants moved steadily north into the San Joaquin Valley, where cotton farming and fruit picking and packing required a massive labor force.<sup>100</sup> Because the Valley required large numbers of laborers in different sectors of the economy, chiefly the agricultural and railway industries, and because there was relatively little completion for the jobs in these sectors, Mexican immigrants were readily able to find employment. Mexicans found jobs at Southern Pacific Railroad and at local canneries, especially

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Avella, *Capital City*, 216.

<sup>100</sup> Avella, *Capital City*, 217-218.

after Congress passed restrictive immigration policies aimed at Southern and Eastern Europeans during the 1920's.<sup>101</sup>

Because of the rapid increase of the Mexican population within the golden state in 1929 Governor Clement C. Young appointed a Mexican Fact-Finding Committee to assess the scope and condition of Latino/a growth in California.<sup>102</sup> The 1930 report estimated that close to one quarter of a million Mexicans lived in California. Sacramento County recorded only 215 Mexicans in 1910 and 850 Mexicans in 1920.<sup>103</sup> It is safe to assume that the numbers in the report were not completely accurate, and the Young report probably undercounted the number Mexicans residing within the state. However the importance of the report was that "...it was one of the first official acknowledgements of a demographic shift that would eventually change the face of California. The significance for Sacramento was its recording of the rapidly increasing growth."<sup>104</sup>

The Great Depression of the 1930's displaced millions of American workers, who then headed for California. Consequently, Mexicans in California, including Sacramento, lost their jobs in the cities and also found themselves displaced from agricultural jobs by Dust Bowl migrants. Prior to the Great Depression Anglos had accounted for less than twenty percent of California migratory agricultural workers, however, by 1936, they had increased to more than eighty-five percent.<sup>105</sup> No longer considered to be the backbone of the region's agriculture and other employment sectors, Mexicans instead were viewed as an economic liability, and had become target of resentment, now viewed as scapegoats. World War II, however, brought

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<sup>101</sup> Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento: Indomitable City* (Charleston: Arcadia Press, 2003), 108.

<sup>102</sup> Avella, *Capital City*, 218.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> *Sierra Nevada Virtual Museum*

<http://www.sierranavadavirtualmuseum.com/docs/galleries/history/culture/mexican.htm>  
(March 2011).

about a shift in social and economic policy and infused a renewing hope where the Great Depression had brought despondency. The Second World War caused a tremendous labor shortage in the state and especially in Sacramento, all of which caused a substantial increase in the Mexican population in the region during the 1940's.<sup>106</sup>

Within the city of Sacramento, Mexican neighborhoods were definitely forming and the area directly north of the downtown known as Alkali Flats developed as the main center of settlement during the 1940's. Different types of business, shops and restaurants were located there, and the residents of the neighborhood were able to find jobs in the near-by canneries and railroad.<sup>107</sup> Other settlements were located on the far south side of Sacramento. The Mexican community was enhanced by the presence of migrant workers who worked in the fields during the planting and harvest seasons but returned to Sacramento between crops.<sup>108</sup> While a group consisting mainly of farm workers, many American-born, lived across the river in Bryte and Broderick neighborhoods, in what is known today as West Sacramento.<sup>109</sup> With the rise of the Mexican population during and after the World War II, concentrated residential areas began to spread south on Franklin Boulevard when immigrants from the Mexican states of Chihuahua and Durango arrived to work in the canneries.<sup>110</sup> A consistent rise in the numbers of Mexicans working and living in the region resulted in the formation of a large ethnic community and an increasingly more active and pronounced local culture.<sup>111</sup>

In 1940 there was roughly 2200 Mexicans living in Sacramento County by 1942 the wartime labor shortages all over the southwest pressed congress to bring in Mexican farm and railroad workers under the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Avella, *Capital City*, 217.

<sup>108</sup> Avella, *Capital City*, 217.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Avella, *Sacramento*, 108.

<sup>111</sup> Avella, *Capital City*, 219.

Bracero program. Mexicans were specifically recruited to work in northern California for the Southern Pacific railroad yards, because of this recruitment the number of Mexicans living in the Sacramento valley rose dramatically.<sup>112</sup> Visibility of the Mexican population was probably first noticed by local Catholic churches where many of the immigrants came for baptisms and weekly service.<sup>113</sup> In 1944, the Catholic Mexicans of the city managed to raise enough money to buy a former Catholic Church downtown and they named it *Our Lady of Guadalupe*.<sup>114</sup> This center proved to be an important gathering point for the Mexican community of Sacramento and a place to share their social, religious, and cultural traditions. Another manner by which the Mexican population of Sacramento fostered community was by forming *mutualistas* (mutual-aid-societies), such as the Alianza Hispano-Americana, a fraternal insurance society that had two chapters in Sacramento. These social and cultural organizations provided entertainment and fellowship and promoted the culture and customs of Mexico.<sup>115</sup>

Mexicans and Mexican Americans historically have had a significant impact on the social fabric of the Sacramento Valley. In 1948, the residents of the Sacramento area received a monumental acknowledgement from the government of Mexico for maintaining a sincere sense of cultural continuity even though they now lived abroad. In a celebration that was attended by at least 2,500 people, the community members participated in a dedication ceremony for the Mexican Community Center at Sixth and W Streets.<sup>116</sup> Representatives from the Mexican government lauded the efforts of the local Sacramento community and shared that this center was believed to be the first of its kind in the United States.<sup>117</sup> The

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<sup>112</sup> Avella, *Sacramento*, 109.

<sup>113</sup> Avella, *Sacramento*, 108-109.

<sup>114</sup> Avella, *Sacramento*, 110.

<sup>115</sup> Avella, *Capital City*, 219.

<sup>116</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 16 August 1948.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

center was constructed in hopes that it could serve as a central meeting space for cultural and social activities for the Mexican American community in Sacramento.

#### BRACEROS

Many Mexican Americans pledged their loyalty to the United States by serving in the military and playing a key role in the victory of World War II, just as significant was the effort provided by Mexican farm laborers on the home front. The significant impact braceros left on United States history during the Second World War was as meaningful and substantial of an influence as they left on Sacramento history. Braceros played an essential part in alleviating the labor shortage in many industries but in particular the agricultural sector. The Mexican workers were eager and willing to help out in the war effort and proved to be indispensable at their jobs, however their experience was also filled with racism, discrimination and manipulation, mostly at the hands of the local politicians, businessmen and farmers.

The bracero program began in 1942 and ended twenty-two years later in 1964. The initial period of the program that encompassed the Second World War lasted from the summer of 1942 to the winter of 1947. Although this period was significant with respect to the American war effort, it was rather small in scale and only imported fewer than quarter million Mexican laborers in five and a half years.<sup>118</sup> Relatively speaking the number was small considering that almost four and one half million Mexicans that were recruited in the last fourteen years of the program.<sup>119</sup> With the almost one half million Mexicans serving in the armed forces, braceros served in a different capacity, their labor played a crucial part in helping the United States to victory. According to scholar-activist Ernesto Galarza, the sentiment was that the Mexican laborers would make-up a versatile labor force that could be easily moved to many different locations in cases where local labor needs fell short and crop production would be threatened. The Mexican workers

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<sup>118</sup> Meier and Ribera, 172.

<sup>119</sup> Meier and Ribera, 173.



would serve as “shock troops” used only in cases of emergencies as protection against the loss of valuable crop production.<sup>120</sup> What constituted an emergency was up for debate, however, what was not up for debate was that not only did the braceros fill an important need towards the war effort; but more importantly they were also seen as an economic boon by California’s agribusiness. Because by pure meaning, a real emergency exists continuously in California’s harvests, thus the advantages of a cheap and controllable bracero labor reserve were obvious. Flexibility and controlled mobility amounted to the best kind of crop insurance. The bracero work force was in fact the answer to all of the commercial farmers problems.<sup>121</sup>

The burden of World War II proved to be especially significant in the Sacramento Valley due to the existing agricultural sector in the region. The United States required food for its troops, for domestic consumption but also for its allies, this meant that maximum farm production was essential to the war effort.<sup>122</sup> Domestic war policy however, disrupted a key segment of agriculture production when in 1942 the displacement and internment of the Japanese population began in the Southwest. This had two major repercussions for the agricultural sector, first the removing of Japanese field workers, and second, the displacing of Japanese farm families whose labor contributed significantly to the agriculture industry.<sup>123</sup> As the Japanese were removed and forced into concentration camps all throughout the Southwest, including Sacramento, the farm labor shortage intensified.

Originally, Mexico was not enthusiastic about sending its young men to the United States as laborers, however, as U.S. authorities continued to pressure, it eventually conceded. The two governments

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<sup>120</sup> Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (San Jose: The Rosicrucian Press, 1964) 55.

<sup>121</sup> Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 55.

<sup>122</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, 144.

<sup>123</sup> Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 42.

entered into a preliminary agreement in 1942 called the Emergency Labor Program, this agreement would oversee the recruitment of braceros.<sup>124</sup> There were still fresh memories in Mexico surrounding the mass repatriation of both Mexican and American citizens back to Mexico following the Great Depression, which many regarded as a mass expulsion, so it is understandable why the Mexican government proceeded with such caution when entering into this agreement with the United States.<sup>125</sup> However, after a series of negotiations both countries crafted an agreement that would be mutually satisfying. Mexico and the United States agreed to a contract ensuring the workers' rights. The major points of the contract stipulated that Mexican workers would not displace domestic workers, they would be exempt from military service, and discrimination in all forms would not be tolerated. It also detailed regulations regarding transportation, housing, and wages for the braceros.<sup>126</sup> It took close to a year of negotiations, but in 1943 congress approved Public law 45. This act propelled the United States government to the role of labor contractor and started the "administered migration" of Mexican laborers into the American Southwest.<sup>127</sup>

In northern Californian braceros were received with enthusiasm, festivals were organized with bands, parades and big public gatherings. Mexican national holidays were celebrated with free barbeques at the expense of the local growers and citizens.<sup>128</sup> Not only did Mexican braceros work hard, they also found time to relax and enjoy some time off. In Sacramento the Spreckels Sugar Company, along with several of the local growers, all joined up to sponsor a celebration for the Mexican workers. Local Mexican Americans were hired to recruit women dancers and signers to provide entertainment for the farm workers. The braceros were provided transportation from the farms to the Elks Hall in Sacramento and enjoyed food,

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<sup>124</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, 144.

<sup>125</sup> Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 47.

<sup>126</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, 144.

<sup>127</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, 145.

<sup>128</sup> Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 55.

music and dancing, all in the hopes of building good will between the Sugar Company, the local farmers and the braceros.<sup>129</sup>

The good will and the embracing of immigrant labor could clearly be linked to the greed of the California growers and their eagerness to manipulate and take advantage of the bracero laborers and this specific labor program. After all, Mexican bracero workers did arrive in California as emergency labor units recruited to assist local growers in saving the basic crops that were pivotal to the war effort.<sup>130</sup> And, indeed that is what they did, they worked hard in various crops and proved to be exactly what the agricultural sector needed and more. It did not take long before the braceros demonstrated their skill and work ethic that became if not essential, at least highly sought-after in most aspects of the agriculture industry. They soon became the backbone of the labor force in the Sacramento Valley for many significant crops including— lettuce, strawberries, asparagus, grapes, tomatoes and melons.<sup>131</sup>

Not all braceros worked in the fields, in addition to the agricultural sector braceros also worked in the railway industry. In April of 1944, about 40,000 Mexicans were working on twenty-four railroads, with the total number of men contracted during the year for track maintenance rising above 80,000.<sup>132</sup> In 1945, close to 70,000 braceros were working on U.S. railroads.<sup>133</sup> Work on the tracks was by nature physically demanding and often dangerous. There are several recorded cases of death resulting from accidents, sunstroke, and heat exhaustion. Violations by the railroad companies of the contract agreement were

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<sup>129</sup> *San Jose Mercury Herald*, 5 December 1942.

<sup>130</sup> Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 87.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 54.

<sup>133</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, 146.

commonplace.<sup>134</sup> As the need for workers increased and the types of work diversified, government officials needed to address the issue of the bracero program.

As the state capital, Sacramento turned out to be the focal point for significant discussions surrounding the importation of farm labor from Mexico. With California and in particular the Sacramento Valley, charged with producing, processing and shipping more food than ever, while utilizing less than expected labor, this proved to be a tall order. State senators heard testimony from local growers regarding the possibility of crop shortages and heavy losses due to the labor shortages. Although the state senate committee gave its endorsement to a guest worker program, many ideas were explored including; an encouragement by state Senator Kenny of Los Angeles asking that approximately 150,000 of the states old age pensioners volunteer as farm workers.<sup>135</sup>

With the city of Sacramento extremely concerned over the issue of farm labor shortages and predictions of millions of dollars of losses to local growers, the local businessmen and law enforcement officials jumped to action to address this situation. In a report by *The Sacramento Bee* in June of 1942 the sentiment of urgency and a need to address the problem of labor shortage resonated clearly. Possible solutions of citizen volunteer programs as well as recruiting young boys through YMCA camps were discussed. However in the same article under the sub section *West End Problem* the article states: "Among the matters scheduled for discussion is that of keeping the west end of the city free of drunkards and loafers who should be working on the farms."<sup>136</sup> The west end of town was where most of the city's minority

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> *San Jose Mercury Herald*, 23 April 1942.

<sup>136</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 4 June 1942.

population resided, and by 1950 the west end comprised eighty-seven` percent of the city's Mexican population.<sup>137</sup>

A local political group called the Family Welfare and Relief Committee of the Sacramento Community Welfare Council met in June of 1942 to discuss the farm labor shortage in Sacramento. Basically the discussion surrounded on ways to entrap minorities, mostly Mexican and “recruit them as farm laborers” with the full assistance of the local law enforcement. The local community was working alongside the local law enforcement to enforce *greaser laws*.<sup>138</sup> These were usually some sort of vagrancy or loitering ordnances that were aimed at targeting Mexican men for petty misdemeanors. The strategy consisted of taking the men into the custody of local law enforcement that then could be used as a cheap and controllable labor force in the agricultural sector. In a Sacramento Bee report highlighting the committee's understanding and praise for the manner in which farm laborers were being sought to fill the labor shortage, the following excerpt was taken:

The committee, under the chairmanship of Roy C. Donnally, manager of the United States Employment Service office in Sacramento, agreed wonderful strides so far have been made by various branches of the law enforcement agencies in making men available for farm labor. Donnally said the committee generally felt the perseverance of the local agencies in cleaning up the west end of the city will go a long way in helping the labor shortage. He said Chief of Police Alec K. McAllister, Sheriff Don Cox and the state board of equalization were complimented on the work they have done in this regard.<sup>139</sup>

Again, the west end of the city is where a majority of the Mexican population lived. This was a clear example of harassment and entrapment by local businessmen and local law enforcement officials to secure a cheap and controllable labor force.

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<sup>137</sup> Jesus Hernandez, *Connecting Segregation to Contemporary Housing Credit Practices and Foreclosures: A Case Study of Sacramento*, Written testimony submitted to the National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (Los Angeles Hearing, September 9, 2008), 8.

<sup>138</sup> Vagrancy laws that were clearly aimed at prohibiting the presence of Mexicans within the community.

<sup>139</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 11 June 1942

In a related article from *The Sacramento Bee* dated June of 1942, the report outlines a program where farmers are allowed to request prisoners serving sentences for minor offenses such as vagrancy and loitering, to be paroled and released as farm laborers under the custody of the farmer.<sup>140</sup> This report illustrates the sentiment of the previous articles. The local law enforcement officials worked at targeting certain areas of the city along with certain individuals for minor infractions then took them into custody, thereby, instantly creating a cheap and controllable labor force. This scheme proved to be conscious and systematic process of controlling Mexicans for the purpose of social and economic manipulation.

Demand for farm workers remained steady during the harvest season of 1942. Reports by the state's agricultural officials and U.S. employment services stated that the arrival of Mexican workers helped to ease Sacramento's labor shortage. Specifically with regards to the sugar beet harvest, a key crop in the agricultural war effort, labor needs jumped some 14 percent during a one-week period in late September. Mexican braceros were critical in helping alleviate a sugar beet shortage.<sup>141</sup> By June of 1943, almost a year after the first Mexican braceros arrive in Sacramento, the local Chamber of Commerce was still extremely dependent on the braceros. The Chamber made plans to find and fill 11,300 farm worker jobs essential to the harvesting of several thousands of acres of tomatoes, sugar beets, pears, beans and almonds.<sup>142</sup>

Sacramento played an extremely significant role in the home front war effort and contributed profoundly to the history of the United States. The following chapter examines the contributions and experiences of Mexican American men in the Armed forces.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> *San Jose Mercury Herald*, 9 October 1942.

<sup>142</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 16 June 1943.

### CHAPTER III

#### **EXPERIENCE IN THE ARMED FORCES**

Mexican Americans are not monolithic and the following *testimonios* provided a clear example of the wide spectrum of emotions and experiences that Mexican Americans had during this significant era in history. From the ultra patriotic soldiers wanting to prove that they were just as American as any other man, to the humble yet honorable Mexican Americans ready to serve when their name was called. These stories are juxtaposed with Mexican Americans who saw the manner in which their communities were being discriminated against and how Mexican American veterans were returning to a county that treated them as second-class citizens. These histories tell the story of a group of people that were just as brave as any soldier in wanting end the discrimination and choose to consciously reject military service. Also illustrated are the stories of American born men forced to leave this country because of repatriation a decade before the war, coming back to work in the United States and eventually because of a contradictory and ill-managed immigration policy found themselves serving the country of their birth. These collective experiences are distinctive but work to illustrate the unique and complex contributions and experiences that Mexican Americans had in the Armed forces.

#### PARTICIPATION IN THE ARMED FORCES

There were a number of reasons why Mexican Americans were highly involved with the war effort. First, many of the Mexican communities tended to have large populations of draft-age Mexican American males. Most of these young men did not have jobs that were considered to be essential to the war effort, thus making them eligible for the draft. When World War II started there were approximately 2.7 million Mexicans living in the United States, close to one-third of those were draft age males, estimates show that

anywhere from 375,00 to 500,00 Mexican Americans served in the armed forces.<sup>143</sup> For those men who were living in the United States without proper residency documents, they were “encouraged” to enlist by legislation that promised citizenship in exchange for military service.<sup>144</sup> Second, because Mexican Americans generally did not have the economic mobility that most Anglos had, the military provided the chance for this upward movement. World War II also presented Mexican Americans with a perceived opportunity to gain social and cultural acceptance from the country. It was a way for Mexican Americans to help promote the ideals and promise that the United States of America had represented to so many generations of people. Raul Morín, a veteran of WWII, was one of the first authors to document the experiences and contributions of Mexican American soldiers in World War II and the Korean War in his book *Among The Valiant*. Morín writes:

Most of us were more than glad to be given the opportunity to serve in the war. We knew there was something great about this country that was worth fighting for. We felt that this was an opportunity to show the rest of the nation that we too were also ready, willing, and able to fight for our nation. It did not matter whether we were looked upon as Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, or belonging to a minority group; the war soon made us all genuine Americans, eligible and available immediately to fight and defend our country, the United States of America.<sup>145</sup>

This type of sentiment convinced a substantial portion of the Mexican American population to participate in the war.

While serving in World War II Mexican Americans distinguished themselves as a group that was willing and capable of taking on any mission or objective. Mexican Americans also proved that they could do this with an extremely high level of resolve and success. According to a few Mexican American veterans a predominant sentiment was that: “Officers found it easy to exploit the sense of machismo, or super manliness, of Latin American males. Many Mexican American G.I.s volunteered for hazardous duties,

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<sup>143</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 323.

<sup>144</sup> Meier and Ribera, 160.

<sup>145</sup> Raul Morín, *Among the Valiant* (Alhambra: Borden Publishing Co., 1966), 24.



exhibiting an exaggerated patriotism produced by their determination to prove that they were as “American” as anyone.”<sup>146</sup> This determination was noticed and confirmed as twelve Mexican Americans went on to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor. Alejandro Ruiz exemplified this patriotism as he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Truman in 1946. Ruiz’s official rank at the time of his service was Private First Class, U.S. Army, 165th Infantry 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, his citation reads:

When his unit was stopped by a skillfully camouflaged enemy pillbox, he displayed conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty. His squad, suddenly brought under a hail of machinegun fire and a vicious grenade attack, was pinned down. Jumping to his feet, Pfc. Ruiz seized an automatic rifle and lunged through the flying grenades and rifle and automatic fire for the top of the emplacement. When an enemy soldier charged him, his rifle jammed. Undaunted, Pfc. Ruiz whirled on his assailant and clubbed him down. Then he ran back through bullets and grenades, seized more ammunition and another automatic rifle, and again made for the pillbox. Enemy fire now was concentrated on him, but he charged on, miraculously reaching the position, and in plain view he climbed to the top. Leaping from one opening to another, he burst after burst into the pillbox, killing 12 of the enemy and completely destroying the position. Pfc. Ruiz's heroic conduct, in the face of overwhelming odds, saved the lives of many comrades and eliminated an obstacle that long would have checked his unit's advance.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in California: A History of Mexican Americans in California*, (San Francisco: Boyd & Fraser Publishing Company, 1984), 71.

<sup>147</sup> US Army Center of Military History, *Medal of Honor Recipients World War II*, <http://www.history.army.mil/html/moh/wwII-m-s.html> (January 2011).



ALEJANDRO RUIZ AND FAMILY IN WASHINGTON D.C. 1946, (PHOTO COURTESY OF CELIA M. RUIZ).



ALEJANDRO RUIZ WITH PRESIDENT TRUMAN, 1946 (PHOTO COURTESY OF CELIA M. RUIZ).

In the Pacific theater, United States GIs faced some of the war's toughest and deadliest battles. An elite fighting force named the Bushmasters more than stepped up to the occasion. The soldiers came up with the name Bushmaster in Panama. While they trained they would have to kill enormous snakes that were called Bushmasters, and so they decided to name themselves after the deadly jungle snake. The Bushmasters were made up almost entirely of Mexican American men. They trained in the deepest jungles of Panama and New Guinea in preparation for fierce battles in the South Pacific. General Douglas MacArthur called them the greatest fighting combat team ever deployed for battle.<sup>148</sup>

Rudy Yniguez was an 18-year-old from Sacramento when he went into the Navy and fought in Iwo Jima and Guam. In total he participated in five invasions. He recalled the following about his service:

Getting sailors back in from the island into the ships, you're lost out there. You haven't eaten. Dark, wet, you can't find your ship, because there's thousands out there. Small ones, big ones, just bombarding that place day and night. Thousands of people just floating in the water. That's hard to take.<sup>149</sup>

When Yniguez returned from the war he recalled that his family was extremely proud of him, and that he shared a particularly poignant moment with his father: "The fathers are proud of what their kids did. My dad was... he was a man. He thanked me. He thanked me for what I had done. Imagine him thanking me?"<sup>150</sup> The Yniguez family was typical of the era; they returned home from the war and got on with their lives asking only to be treated with equality and respect, a small request considering the honorable service that Mexican Americans displayed during combat.

In Sacramento, it was very important to the community to make sure that they identified the types of services the returning soldiers needed and were expecting when they returned from the war. *The*

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<sup>148</sup> *Valentía: Mexican Americans in World War II*, DVD, produced and written by Corita Gravitt (Sacramento, CA: KVIE/PBS, 2007).

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

*Sacramento Union*, a local newspaper, in conjunction with the VA Subcommittee of the Sacramento Postwar Coordinating Committee developed a questionnaire/survey that asked the returning veterans eight questions in addition to some basic personal information.<sup>151</sup> This was all to gauge the type of help that the servicemen would need upon return back to Sacramento. The questionnaire was published in *The Sacramento Union* and also asked friends and family members of returning veterans to help distribute the questionnaire to the returning men. It is unknown exactly what resulted from this particular questionnaire, however, this example does illustrate—at least at a basic level—that the Sacramento community was interested in helping their local servicemen readjust when they returned home.

In 1946 the war department released its first consolidated list of army casualties and missing persons in World War II. *The Sacramento Union* reported that in total 308,974 men lost their lives in combat.<sup>152</sup> Of the twenty-nine counties located north of the San Joaquin Valley, Sacramento County, by far, lost the most number of soldiers in WWII with 440 casualties. San Joaquin County was next with 283 casualties, followed by Sonoma at 165 and Solano with 150.<sup>153</sup> Of the 440 casualties Sacramento County sustained approximately 7.5% were soldiers of Spanish surname.

**TABLE 1.0: SACRAMENTO COUNTY CASUALTIES IN WWII**

	<b>Total Number Dead</b>	<b>Percent of Total</b>
California Deaths	17,022	--
Sacramento County Deaths	440	2.5%
Sacramento County KIA (Killed In Action)	219	1.2 %
Spanish Surname Deaths	33	>1.0 %

**Table 1.0 based on data found in *The Sacramento Union*, June 27, 1946 “440 War dead for County of Sacramento”**

<sup>151</sup> *Sacramento Union*, 30 June 1944.

<sup>152</sup> *Sacramento Union*, 27 June 1946

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

Not everyone was eager to prove their American patriotism, not everyone was ready to serve in the armed forces and not all Mexican Americans felt the overwhelming need to put their life on the line to defend the United States. Ruben Reyes was a Chicano from Arizona who moved to California at the age of 18 to find work at the Libby cannery in Sacramento in 1949. Affected by the intense racism that he experienced as a youth, Reyes had fostered some very profound ideas about what it meant to be an American in the 1940's. Reyes had developed an embittered view of life in America for a Chicano and openly questioned what it meant to serve the United States military as a Chicano.

I definitely told them, from day one, that there was no way in the world that I was ever going to fight for this country. Some people used to say tell them that you are a Conscientious Objector, and that's the reason you won't fight. But I, I didn't want to do that, I wanted to tell the truth. I, they took me from, they started out with a sergeant, I ended up talking to a Lieutenant and then to a company commander and so on, and I kept telling the same story, hey look, I grew up in a place where they wouldn't serve me food, they wouldn't allow me in any restaurants, we couldn't swim in your swimming pools, you know, what are you talking about? Freedom in America? Baloney. You know, that's, America doesn't belong to me and I've never been part of the melting pot. And basically, I just don't recognize myself as a, as someone that wants to defend a country that is as racist as this country is. And I refused to fight.<sup>154</sup>

Reyes was in the service for a total of eighteen months, however, he continued to refuse to fight and eventually received an Undesirable Discharge.<sup>155</sup> Reyes continued his criticism of America and the racism that he experienced:

I didn't believe this was a free country or that there was equal opportunity. I just, from the core, to this very day, I believe this is about one of the most racist countries in the world. I believe that and I, you know, live with that. My kids think that I am awfully hard nose, but hey, it's been with me too long and I still see it. What you say is a subtle, I call sophisticated racism, you know. It's just a different way of doing it. The anger and the racism and the hatred for people that are the non-Whites in this country, is just as strong as it was when I grew up. It's just that they hide it and they are just bigger hypocrites than they were. I have more respect for the redneck racist that lived in those days, cause they called you a, you know, I never heard the word Spic until I came to

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<sup>154</sup> Ruben Reyes, oral history conducted by Rosana Madrid, Sacramento, CA, December 5, 1983. p. 10

<sup>155</sup> Discharge under other than honorable conditions of a person from military service by administrative action.

California. . . I mean, people didn't hide it then. At least you knew where you stood.<sup>156</sup>

Although Reyes was drafted to fight in the Korean War his experience of seeing Mexican Americans veterans return from World War II and continue to be disrespected had a significant impact on him. Reyes himself had experienced challenges as well as blatant acts of discrimination that helped to form his consciousness during this era. He made a conscious choice to, not object, but rather to reject the United States military. Although Reyes used his time in the armed forces as an opportunity to stand up for his rights and point out some of the glaring contradictions within United States society, not all servicemen had the same experience; some men were simply victims of circumstance.

The Unzueta brothers, Cesario and Miguel, were both born in Santa Barbara, California in the 1920's. They were forced to leave California because of the racist and anti-immigrant repatriation policy that resulted in response to the economic hardships of the Great Depression. The major economic implications of the Great Depression consisted of a significant decrease in the level of economic activity in the country, a radical decrease in wages, specifically in the agriculture sector, and a shift towards the mechanization of the agricultural industry. All of which led to a sizable displacement of agricultural labor.<sup>157</sup> Although the Great Depression affected everyone, it presented particular challenges to Chicanos who were situated in a subordinate position in the economy. Compounding the problem of the economic depression was a prevailing notion that by removing immigrant workers and replacing them with Anglo workers the nation would resolve its economic problems.<sup>158</sup> This was an especially contradictory notion considering

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<sup>156</sup> Reyes, pp. 10-11

<sup>157</sup> Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A theory of Racial Inequality*, (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 104.

<sup>158</sup> Barrera, 105.

that the United States had actively recruited Mexican workers only a few years before the Depression and now it was attempting to remove the wrongfully branded “scapegoat” labor force.<sup>159</sup>

At first the father of the Unzueta brothers did not want to leave California, he had a good paying job as a gardener and had managed to secure a proper passport to work and reside in the United States. Although the U.S. government was issuing some payments to people who voluntarily left for Mexico, they were also taking back passports and that was one thing that the boys’ father did not want, he wanted to be able to return to the United States sometime in the future. As time moved on and local pressure for the family to leave mounted, they eventually left for Durango, Mexico in August of 1932. Their father and uncle bought a used pick up truck constructed a make shift camper shell and loaded it up with most of their belongings and a total of twelve passengers. August is the rainy season in Central Mexico so it took them close to one month to travel the fifteen hundred miles to Los Herreras in the state of Durango. After some hindsight Miguel recalled that he thought that his father and uncle were extremely brave to have driven through Mexico with their entire families, considering that the fall out of the Mexican revolution could still be felt throughout the country. Later someone told him that it was not bravery at all but rather ignorance that fueled the trek.<sup>160</sup>

After sometime, both Cesario and Miguel wanted to come to the United States to work, their mother pleaded with them that if they must come to the U.S. that they must not reveal that they were U.S. citizens for she feared that they would be drafted and killed in World War II. This fear was not unfounded, Miguel tells a story about some local boys from Los Herreras, Durango that had been repatriated just like

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<sup>159</sup> Barrera, 106.

<sup>160</sup> Miguel Fernandez Unzueta, interview by Juan Pablo Mercado, Sacramento, CA, April 26, 2011.

the Unzueta's yet decided to volunteer for the war. It didn't take more than a few months for news to reach back to the village that both boys had been killed in combat.<sup>161</sup>

Cesario and Miguel both decided to come to the United States and work under the bracero program and not revealing that they were actual U.S. citizens. They arrived in Yuma, Arizona and worked for a few months but they pay was bad, fifty cents and hour, and the weather was unforgivingly hot. Cesario left Yuma after just five months and reached Canoga Park, California. Miguel followed one month later, however, immigration officials detained him when he reached California. He spent close to a week in San Bernardino being interviewed by immigration officials. During the interviews it was discovered that Miguel was, in fact, a U.S. citizen. Immigration officials falsely threatened Miguel with twenty years in prison for intentionally misleading both the United States and Mexican governments. As a means to avoid prison, Miguel quickly asked to enlist in the U.S. army. Within a week he was transferred to San Pedro for processing and then transferred to Fort Ord for basic training. With news that the fighting in Europe was close to over Miguel spent a total of sixty-two days in the service, was transferred to a base in Marysville, some forty miles north of Sacramento, and was honorably discharged in March of 1945.<sup>162</sup>

Later that year in September of 1945, Cesario was working in a packing plant in Canoga Park, California. One day he was informed that immigration officials would be coming around to inspect the residency documents of all the workers at the plant. Cesario decided to go to LA and to get his official citizenship papers in order rather than to get caught up with the immigration services. At the Los Angeles immigration offices, as soon as Cesario proved that he was a U.S. Citizen they immediately directed him to

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid



the Army registry and he was enlisted on the spot. Cesario served approximately two months in the Army then was transferred to Fort Ord in Northern California and was honorably discharged.<sup>163</sup>

**Army of the United States**

**SEPARATION QUALIFICATION RECORD**  
SAVE THIS FORM. IT WILL NOT BE REPLACED IF LOST

This record of job assignments and special training received in the Army is furnished to the soldier when he leaves the service. In its proper case, information is taken from available Army records and supplemented by personal interview. The information about civilian education and work experience is based on the individual's own statement. The names here given are accurate in honor, experience, prospective employers, representatives of schools or colleges, or use it in any other way that may prove beneficial to him.

1. LAST NAME—FIRST NAME—MIDDLE INITIAL UNZUETA CESARIO E		10. MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS	
2. ARMY REGIMENT, TROOP, BATTAL, OR COMPANY [REDACTED]	3. GRADE Pvt	11. GRADE 1	12. MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY Elementary Troop (S)1
13. ADDRESS (Last and Address, Street, City, County, State) Sacramento, Sacramento, Calif.			
14. DATE OF ENTRY INTO ACTIVE SERVICE 13 Sep 45	15. DATE OF SEPARATION 13 Nov 45	16. DATE OF ENTRY INTO RESERVE 25 Feb 50	
17. PLACE OF SEPARATION SEPARATION PLINY SECTION 1562 SDC FT. ORD, CALIF.			
SUMMARY OF MILITARY OCCUPATIONS			
18. TITLE—DESCRIPTION—RELATED CIVILIAN OCCUPATION  SUMMARY OF TRAINING: SDC: Received basic instruction in close order drill, military courtesy and first aid. Also attended school to study reading and writing.			

NO ADD FORM 100  
1 JUL 1945 100  
This form superseded FD 3 (2) Form 305, 15 July 1945, which will not be used.

MILITARY EDUCATION

14. GRADE OR TYPE OF SCHOOL—GRADE OR CLASSIFICATION—SCHOOL—CITY

None

CIVILIAN EDUCATION

15. GRADE OR TYPE OF SCHOOL—GRADE OR CLASSIFICATION—SCHOOL—CITY 6	16. GRADE OR TYPE OF SCHOOL—GRADE OR CLASSIFICATION—SCHOOL—CITY 1935	17. GRADE OR TYPE OF SCHOOL—GRADE OR CLASSIFICATION—SCHOOL—CITY	18. GRADE OR TYPE OF SCHOOL—GRADE OR CLASSIFICATION—SCHOOL—CITY
19. GRADE AND ADDRESS OF LAST SCHOOL ATTENDED SANTA RITA HS, CALIF.		20. GRADE AND ADDRESS OF SCHOOL—CITY None	
21. GRADE AND ADDRESS OF SCHOOL—CITY			

CIVILIAN OCCUPATIONS

22. TITLE—NAME AND ADDRESS OF EMPLOYER—INDUSTRY—DATE—DESCRIPTION

FARMER: Employed by Hafford Bros. & Co., Contra Costa, Calif., from 1932 to 1945. Worked on various farms in Mexico and the United States. Planted, cultivated, irrigated and harvested corn, vegetables and melons. Drove 2 horse team to plow and cultivate land. Also packed vegetables for market.

AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION

23. REMARKS

24. SIGNATURE OF PERSON WHO SIGNATURED  
*Cesario Unzueta*

25. SIGNATURE OF SEPARATION CLASSIFICATION OFFICER  
*William A. [unclear]*

26. NAME OF OFFICER (Typed or Stamped)  
SIRIBELLA & WAGNER, Maj., Inf.

CESARIO UNZUETA: SEPERATION QUALIFICATION RECORD (DOCUMENT COURTESY OF ROBERT UNZUETA)

<sup>163</sup> Petra Garcia Unzueta, interview by Juan Pablo Mercado, Sacramento, CA, April 12, 2011.

## GI BILL OF RIGHTS

The social impact of World War II in the Sacramento Valley was significant. Upon coming home most veterans had certain expectations about returning from combat, returning to their families and returning to their lives at home. Mexican American veterans, in particular, felt that the sacrifice that they displayed deserved a re-examination of the social discrimination and segregation that faced before they enlisted in the armed forces. The GI Bill of rights was established to ensure that veterans of WWII had federally backed programs available to them when their combat tour was over. The benefits from this program helped many Mexican American veterans after the war but it also denied many deserving veterans of the same assistance.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or what is more commonly referred to as the GI Bill of Rights, was established to help all returning veterans of World War II. This help came in the form of federally funded benefits administered by the Veterans Administration. The Veterans Administration was responsible for implementing the key provisions: education and training, loan guaranty for homes, farms or businesses, and unemployment.<sup>164</sup> The benefits of the GI Bill were an extremely important part of the World War II effort considering that the veterans of World War I had basically been forgotten in terms of federal assistance. The United States government recognized this fact and wanted to move quickly to ensure that this type of situation would not be repeated. According to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs: "Much of the urgency stemmed from a desire to avoid the missteps following World War I, when discharged veterans got little more than a \$60 allowance and a train ticket home."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> USDOVA, *Born of Controversy: The GI Bill of Rights* [http://www.gibill.va.gov/GI\\_Bill\\_Info/history.htm](http://www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/history.htm) (October 2009).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Once veterans returned to the states from their combat tours they were now eligible for a set of quality and life-changing benefits. Before the war, a college education or home ownership was a far-fetched dream for the average American. However, in large part to the benefits outlined in the GI Bill, millions of American men who would have flooded the job market instead opted for education. In 1947, veterans accounted for nearly half of all college admissions, and by the time the original GI Bill ended in July of 1956, 7.8 million of 16 million World War II veterans had participated in an education or training program.<sup>166</sup> The intent of GI Bill was to help all veterans adjust to life back home knowing that they had made a great sacrifice for their country and deserved special assistance due to the unique circumstances that they had experienced while participating in the war. President Roosevelt's statement during the signing of the G.I. Bill on June 22, 1944, clearly illustrated why there was a need for these specific benefits. In his speech the President stated that the bill was essential in order to provide special benefits due to the members of the armed forces. Since the soldiers were obliged to make significant personal and economic sacrifices they deserved definite action by the government to help address their specific issues when they returned home.<sup>167</sup> Ultimately, for all the outstanding benefits that were extended to the veterans there was a real problem that developed for minority veterans accessing these benefits.

Mexican American veterans that returned from World War II had a basic expectation that they would be eligible for and have access to the benefits that were signed into federal law under the GI Bill. However, once they returned they were met with a considerable amount of resistance. Presumably, Mexican American veterans were thought to be equal beneficiaries of the entitlement programs of GI Bill, however, returning servicemen frequently found themselves denied the promptness and adequate receipt of the bill's

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

financial, educational, and health benefits afforded their Anglo counterparts.<sup>168</sup> This was of great concern to Mexican American veterans considering their exemplary service record and commitment that they had exhibited to the United States during this war campaign. These were front-line soldiers for whom close range combat with the enemy was more common than not. However, not a single Latino soldier was reported to have deserted his company, nor was a Mexican American ever charged with cowardice or treason.<sup>169</sup> Mexican American veterans had done all that was asked of them and in return they received second-class status and became an afterthought in terms of accessibility to federal benefits that they had most certainly earned.

Still, when it came time to accessing the benefits of the GI Bill, Mexican American veterans generally experienced problems that their Anglos counterparts did not. Compensation checks processed through the VA were routinely received anywhere from six to eight months late and disability benefits were often mistakenly reduced or totally eliminated without any formal review process.<sup>170</sup> The illusion that by serving the United States in war would somehow change the social political treatment of the Mexican American community was starting to fade. Mexican American veterans returned home to a society that had historically denied them and others the full benefits of citizenship to which they were rightfully entitled, and they immediately found that their military service had done little to change things.<sup>171</sup> A sense of abandonment and rejection was soon becoming the more difficult reality. Because of this prevailing sentiment Mexican Americans needed a way to challenge the system and advocate for the rights of Mexican American veterans in their community.

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<sup>168</sup> Henry Ramos, *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>169</sup> Ramos, 2.

<sup>170</sup> Ramos, 3.

<sup>171</sup> Ramos, 2.

#### AMERICAN GI FORUM

In response to the lack of access that Mexican American veterans were experiencing after the war a number of political organizations were formed to help address these problems. Dr. Héctor P. García founded a forum to advocate for the civic presence of disenfranchised Mexican American veterans.<sup>172</sup> The American GI Forum (AGIF) was established in Corpus Christi, Texas by Dr. Héctor P. García, a native of Texas, a veteran of World War II, and a physician in the Mexican American community of South Texas. He was the perfect person at the right time to lead this organization; he was a respected doctor and an esteemed leader of the Mexican American community who could identify and work to address the many different needs of veterans.<sup>173</sup> Initially the forum was created to address specific needs of the returning Mexican American veterans but because of how the organization was structured it provided the platform for a more comprehensive review of the needs of the entire Mexican American community. The American GI Forum provided Mexican Americans a political presence in local and national policy-making, a space for resistance, and embodied an Americanist civic persona.<sup>174</sup>

The American GI Forum was able to successfully advocate on behalf of the Mexican American veterans of World War II. “While some benefit delays had continued for as long as two years, within six weeks of the Forum’s intervention most of its members began receiving payments and educational assistance.”<sup>175</sup> The results attained by the American GI Forum were not always the full benefits desired by the group; however they were more than what was initially attained and it was necessary to change the system even if by modest gains. “More often than not these improvements were less than entirely

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<sup>172</sup> Michelle Hall Kells, *Héctor P. García: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>173</sup> Ramos, 4.

<sup>174</sup> Kells, 28.

<sup>175</sup> Ramos, 8.

satisfactory, but in the times and places of their occurrence they constituted unprecedented victories.”<sup>176</sup> Additionally, the American GI Forum kept a clear focus and never wavered on its goals; it always sought to emphasize equal access and participation for Mexican Americans in all sectors and institutions within the United States.<sup>177</sup>

The Sacramento chapter of the American GI Form was named after Alejandro Renteria Ruiz who lived at the Veterans Home of Yountville, California about one hour west of Sacramento until he passed on November 20, 2009. Ruiz was a twenty-one year old army private fighting in Okinawa when he singled-handedly killed twelve enemy soldiers and saved the lives of forty men in his platoon.<sup>178</sup> At the time of Ruiz’s death he was the last living Mexican American World War II Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

Hundreds of thousands of Mexican and Mexican American men worked and fought for the United States during the Second World War. They had many a myriad of experiences and contributions that provide an alternative narrative to United States history during this period. Equally as significant were the experiences and the contributions of the Mexican and Mexican American women in the Sacramento Valley during the World War II era.

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<sup>176</sup> Ramos, 9.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> “Alejandro Ruiz United States Congressional Medal of Honor,” *Hispanic Times*, July 1997, 3.

## CHAPTER IV

### **WOMEN ON THE HOME FRONT**

The experience of World War II deeply transformed the lives of Mexican American women in the Sacramento Valley. Employment opportunities in the defense sector that were once closed to women suddenly became open and employers in the region were actively recruiting female workers. Although working conditions in these jobs left much to be desired it still gave women the opportunity to shift the way men, and society as whole, perceived them. Mexican American women also established themselves in the very important cannery industry of the Sacramento Valley and were able to translate this opportunity into positive social mobility. However, not all of the experiences on the home front dealt with employment. Mexican American women of this generation also established themselves as prominent community organizers, philanthropist and pioneers of Mexican American community in Sacramento.

#### WOMEN AT WORK

Women played a central role in both the war effort and the post war economy of Sacramento. During the World War II era women were called upon to fill the massive labor shortages throughout the United States; in Sacramento it was no different. All that was required was cultural permission—and the propaganda factories that were swiftly and collectively convincing women to take jobs in the defense industry provided this push.<sup>179</sup> Employment officials at the Sacramento Air Depot were actively seeking women to fill their mechanical needs in 1942. They were offering women equal pay, starting at \$2,200 a year with full entry status as journeymen if they were hired.<sup>180</sup> They were also soliciting women to take aptitude tests in order train them for the mechanical-type jobs. In a report from *The Sacramento Bee*, Depot officials stated:

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<sup>179</sup> Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited* (Massachusetts: First Meridian Printing, 1988) 200.

<sup>180</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 11 February 1942.

Women as well as men, without previous mechanical training, are eligible to take new mechanic-learner aptitude tests which qualify them for a training course with pay of \$75 per month at Sacramento Junior College or one of more than thirty other institutions over the state cooperating in a new series of in service training courses. Anyone between the ages of 17 and 45 may apply to take the test. Interested persons are directed to apply at local post offices.<sup>181</sup>

During the war women were being offered the ability to work in jobs that had be traditionally only open to men. Moreover, they were now being offered wages that were higher than they used to receiving and that were on par to that of men. This newfound employment and economic opportunity created many changes for women in the work place.

Issues of working conditions were of significant concern to the women who were now working outside their traditional roles. The issues surrounding the working conditions of women were not just talked about on shop floors or between workers. *The Sacramento Union* conducted a symposium to determine the local feelings concerning California's industrial welfare commission's plan to allow women workers to fill the swing shift—11 p.m. to 6 a.m. in the aircraft depots.<sup>182</sup> The issue of women working late hours or swing shifts was a significant point of discussion in the community and within the industrial labor sector. The local women commented that:

The axis is not fighting this war on an eight-hour day basis, husbands are going into the fighting forces, so why can't the women do their bit by working in an airplane plant if it is necessary? Production must go on 24 hours no matter who is behind the machinery.<sup>183</sup>

With this call for full wartime labor mobilization women were also able to bring to light certain economic injustices that they faced in the factories and at the workplace. As a collective, some of the women specifically highlighted what they wanted. They called attention to the fact that they were fighting right behind the front lines—and with equality as a central guiding ethic, women should be afforded the same

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> *Sacramento Union*, 22 August 1942

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.



financial compensation as men.<sup>184</sup> However, not all women worked in the defense sector during the war and in fact a common employer for Mexican women during and after the war was the cannery industry.

Petra Garcia Unzueta was born and raised in Los Herreras, in the Mexican state of Durango. She came to Stockton in the mid 1940's to work while her husband served as a bracero. They eventually reunited and came to Sacramento in 1948. Her husband, Cesario Unzueta, got a job at a local lumberyard and so she took her time looking for work. She began working at one of the local canneries and eventually ended up working for twenty-five years in the cannery industry. She worked for the Libby's, Del Monte and Bercut-Richards canneries. At the Libby's cannery she mainly worked with asparagus but at Del Monte and Bercut-Richards canneries it was predominately peaches and tomatoes.<sup>185</sup>

Unzueta said she had a very good experience working at the canneries and she made many friends there. She mostly worked with Mexicans, both men and women, although there were also a significant number of Chinese workers and workers of other races. The shift-leaders where she worked were all women, Mexican, Italian, American and Portuguese. However, in the warehouse, where only men worked, all the managers were men. <sup>186</sup>

She worked about eight hours a day in the cannery unless overtime was needed. One year she recalled she worked 70 hours a week. She would work the fruit for six days out of the week and then come in on Sunday to wash all of the equipment. Those were ten-hour days, but she said most everybody wanted to work. The wages were not that good and they did not offer medical insurance because she was a

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Petra Garcia Unzueta interview, April 12, 2011.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid

seasonal worker, however they did have a union. She really liked the union she said, because they always “...seemed to help out.”<sup>187</sup>

Unzueta’s experience is somewhat common of Mexican women coming to Sacramento during the World War II era. They had to work, and the work that was available to them was seasonal produce work in the various canneries in the valley. In the canneries they were subjected to the lower wage jobs and even then they were commonly underpaid. An interesting part of her experience is that she mentions the friends that she made at the cannery with much reverence. An important reason why these friendships were meaningful was because they were formed, in part, by a collective effort to resist against the oppressive nature of the working conditions that the women dealt with. These informal workplace bonds grew out of a need for mutual support; but also to help the workers deal with the lack of access to higher wage jobs and to counter the overt discrimination that was realized by the women working in a two-tiered wage system.

The story of Guadalupe C. Aguilar illustrates a different type of social change. Aguilar was born in 1907 in San Antonio, Texas but moved to Sacramento in 1942. She moved to Sacramento for several different reasons, but mostly because a significant number of her family had relocated to northern California; she had a sister and an aunt who lived in Sacramento. Her father worked at Mare Island in the shipyard industry supporting the war effort, but also lived and commuted to work from Sacramento.

Aguilar’s husband, Paulo served in the army during the war and so she was relocated to Sacramento by rail, along with all of her personal belongings.<sup>188</sup> Aguilar worked at American Can Company and discussed her feelings about having all men bosses on the job:

I was used to it so I didn’t think nothing about it. I never have been opposed to a man being the head of the family or being the boss. Sometimes a man is not very good at that, a family man I

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Guadalupe C. Aguilar, oral history conducted by Rosana Madrid, Sacramento, CA, January 16 & 25, 1984. p. 32.

mean, and the woman is better, so, if you, if it's all right with him, he should let his wife take over. See? They will have a better home and uh, but when the man can do everything himself, well it's better if he does it. But my husband, he let me do everything myself. He gave me the money and I did everything.<sup>189</sup>

Aguilar had very definitive ideas about leadership and made no secret that the most capable family member, or for that matter, capable employee should be allowed to be in charge and take on the responsibility of head decision maker, it made no difference if this was a man or a woman. These ideas translated into her personal life and guided her through some tough times dealing with people that thought they could impose their will on her because of her race or gender.

During the war Aguilar and her family had bought a property in Sacramento and paid approximately \$27,000 for it. The area was in the midst of being redeveloped after the war and so some developers wanted to purchase it from her. The only problem was that they did not want to give her fair market value for the property and instead offered her \$24,000. Aguilar responded to the offer in kind:

Listen, the time isn't any more where you people would come and fool the Mexicans, or the Spaniards, or the Indians, and beat them out of their land. I said, we have learned how to speak, read, and write English since then. So you can't tell me what price to take for my land. I want what I'm asking you and that's what I want. So if you can't give it to me, don't lose my time and you don't lose yours.<sup>190</sup>

The buyers eventually agreed to pay market value and she eventually sold the property for \$30,000.<sup>191</sup>

Aguilar represented a conscious shift in the way that women were now starting to assert their rights and demand that they be respected and treated in the forthright manner that they deserved.

#### HOME FRONT EXPERIENCES

Not only did Mexican American women play a significant role in the logistical aspect of the war they were also instrumental in organizing the community behind the war efforts. This organizing took many

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<sup>189</sup> Aguilar, p. 39.

<sup>190</sup> Aguilar, p. 47.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

forms and also had different goals. In addition to uniting community support for the war, these women saw an opportunity to publicly advocate for the social rights of all Mexican Americans. One such woman was Enriqueta Andazola, she was a longtime Sacramento resident and activist for Mexican American rights since the 1920's.<sup>192</sup> A native of Pinos Altos, Chihuahua, Mexico, she came to Sacramento in 1917. Andazola initially found employment with the Sacramento Wool Company but spent most of her years working in the Del Monte Cannery, while her husband, Ignacio Ramirez, worked for Southern Pacific Railroad.<sup>193</sup> "In addition to raising a family and working for 25 years at a local cannery, she formed a club for Mexican American women, Las Amigas del Hogar, and in 1939 she founded Union Femenie [sic]."<sup>194</sup> Additionally, Andazola sent four sons and a son-in-law to World War II, and helped lead a group called the Mexican War Mothers. It marked one of the first times locally that Mexican Americans asserted themselves publically.<sup>195</sup> Andazola had a significant impact on the Mexican American community in Sacramento and when she passed away in 1980 was affectionately referred to in her eulogy as "la pionera de nuestra colonia Mexicana."<sup>196</sup>

Andazola took it upon herself to be extremely active in the community and aimed at organizing groups and events that promoted cultural pride within her community.

She organized social clubs for women that sponsored dances and other social events. She played a role in organizing a branch of the Alianza Hispano-Americana in 1936 and took particular pride in sponsoring patriotic and cultural programs for the Sacramento community.<sup>197</sup>

Andazola was also instrumental in helping to promote and organize Sacramento's Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day Celebrations.<sup>198</sup> One particular center that had a significant impact on the

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<sup>192</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>193</sup> Avella, *Capitol City*, 219.

<sup>194</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> Avella, *Capitol City*, 219.

<sup>197</sup> Avella, *Capitol City*, 220.

Mexican American community in Sacramento was El Centro Mexicano de Sacramento. After the establishment of the center Andazola was extremely active in the organization and “worked hard to make the new center a place of cultural pride for the city’s Latinos/as.”<sup>199</sup> But perhaps one of her more significant contributions to the Mexican American community of Sacramento was that of her World War II War Memorial.

Four of Andazola’s sons and one son-in-law had served in the military during World War II, because of this; she and her close friend Antima Perez formed a group called the Mexican War Mothers. During the war this group actively worked at boosting the morale of Latino soldiers in the Sacramento area, and Andazola along with the other Mexican War Mothers hosted dances, made meals, sent cards, and visited sick soldiers.<sup>200</sup> The Mexican War Mothers felt it was very important to support and honor the total war effort but in particular to note the sacrifice that the people from their community had made. “To honor the memory and service of Mexican Veterans, the war mothers raised money for a Mexican-American War Memorial, with a statue of a Mexican soldier...”<sup>201</sup> In 1951, this memorial was placed in front of *El Centro Mexicano de Sacramento*; when *El Centro* closed in 1975, the memorial was moved to Capitol Park. In Capitol Park, which lies just across the street from the state Capitol in downtown Sacramento, stands one of Enriqueta Andazola’s realized dreams: A statue honoring all veterans of WWII, but in particular the Mexican American men who sacrificed their lives so valiantly during the Second World War. The likeness for the statue was inspired by a photograph of one of Andazola’s sons in his Army uniform.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>199</sup> Avella, *Capitol City*, 221.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.



CALIFORNIA MEXICAN-AMERICAN  
WAR MEMORIAL



IN MEMORY OF THE AMERICAN SERVICEMEN OF HISPANIC DESCENT AND  
ALL OTHERS WHO SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES TO  
PROTECT THE FREEDOMS WE ENJOY.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

World War II brought about many gains and many losses in the Sacramento Valley. Because of the opportunities and experiences of Mexican Americans in the war they felt they were better equipped to challenge for jobs, seats at the university and housing in the city that had been previously only available to White's. White Americans, in turn, felt the uneasiness of their geographic and cultural spheres getting smaller, they translated that feeling into racial tension and decided to move away. Because of restrictive economic and housing policies that local White's established they were able to restrict the mobility and employment opportunities of Mexican Americans in Sacramento. These experiences along with the totality of World War II led to the social advocacy and civil rights movements of Mexican Americans of the 1950s and 1960s.

#### GAINS AND LOSSES

When most Anglo veterans returned home from World War II they wanted a return to normalcy. They wanted it to go back to the way it was before the war, as if they never left; however, this was not the case for the many Mexican American veterans that returned. After risking their lives for the United States, Mexican American veterans expected that this sacrifice would lead to a change in attitudes at home, veteran Raul Morin recalls:

For the returning Mexican-American veteran, things were different, and further more, he did not want to find things the way he had left them. Not that he had not dreamed of coming back home to his loved ones, but there were a few things he did not care for when he got back.<sup>203</sup>

Mexican American veterans expected that their military service would prove once and for all that they too deserved all the rights and access that go along with full citizenship, the rights and access that their fellow

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<sup>203</sup> Morín. 277.

Anglo veterans experienced.

With the emergence of Mexican American political groups and a sense that the national agenda had shifted in way that would include minorities Mexican Americans felt they had the ability to move in spaces that were once restricted to Anglos only. Inspired by the political rhetoric coming from Washington D.C. many Mexican Americans believed that social change was within reach.

Truman's 1947 State of the Union address, condemning racism and bigotry and challenging the limits of the current legislation to protect the civil rights of citizens, signaled a new level of consciousness within the majority population.<sup>204</sup>

This "new level of consciousness" provided Mexican Americans the incentive to try to move into higher levels of socioeconomic status. The most coveted jobs were found in the city centers. Subsequently, the wartime period resulted in a significant increase of the Mexican population into city centers.<sup>205</sup> This social mobility pattern was a clear result of the changes that were brought about by World War II.

After the war Mexican Americans began a migration pattern from rural to urban that statistically manifested itself in the Southwest; particularly in California, Chicanos comprised the fastest urbanizing group. In 1950 city-dwelling Chicanos made up sixty-six percent of the total Mexican population in the Southwest and nearly seventy-six percent in California.<sup>206</sup> Mexican Americans were moving into the cities in a far greater numbers prior to any other time in history. This move can be attributed to a few key factors. Mexican Americans were now better able to compete for higher paying jobs located in the city. According to Mario Barrera between 1930 and 1950 there was a significant drop in the percent of unskilled jobs that Chicanos held in California, about 20%. Conversely, there was a 20% increase in the semiskilled and skilled jobs that Chicanos held in the state (see Table 1). In addition to jobs many Mexican Americans were now

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<sup>204</sup> Kells, 74.

<sup>205</sup> Manuel G. Gonzalez, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 165.

<sup>206</sup> Camarillo, 78.



able to attend colleges and universities because of the GI Bill. This resulted in an increase of the Mexican American population on campuses through out the southwest. As Mexican Americans were moving into the city the Anglos that were already there started to feel their sphere getting increasingly smaller.

**TABLE 2.0: CHICANO OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION IN CALIFORNIA 1930-1950, (PERCENT)**

<b>Occupational Level</b>	<b>1930</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Professional & technical	1.0	2.6	1.6 %
Managers, proprietors & officials	1.9	4.5	2.6 %
Clerical	3.2	6.4	3.2 %
Craftsmen & Foremen (Skilled)	7.0	13.9	6.9 %
Operatives (Semiskilled)	8.1	21.6	13.5 %
Laborers (Unskilled)	37.6	17.7	-19.9 %
Service	4.2	5.5	1.3 %
Farm Laborers	35.7	23.4	- 12.3 %
Farmers & Farm managers	1.3	2.7	1.4 %
Occupation not reported	-----	0.0	

**Source: Table 2.0 is based on data found in Mario Barrera's book *Race and Class in the Southwest*; p. 136.**

Due to the urbanization of Mexican Americans into the cities Anglos living in these areas experienced a racial threat. They did not want to live in the same spaces as minorities. This caused a massive exodus of Anglos into the suburbs, Chicano historian Albert Camarillo notes: "At the same time urban Anglos were seeking homes in the suburbs of the metropolitan areas. As Anglos moved from their

inner cities, Chicanos and blacks took their place.”<sup>207</sup> It was a spatial swap of sorts, but now the more rural areas were being developed to be more accessible for the residents to connect with the urban areas. Not only were Anglos moving from the urban areas they were also developing formal and informal structures to assure that minorities could not enter these spaces; this strategy was known as redlining; state sponsored directives of racially restrictive agreements preventing non-White occupancy of homes in White neighborhoods.<sup>208</sup> Mexican Americans were segregated residentially to the city centers now and unable to move to different neighborhoods because of the redlining practice. In Sacramento racial restrictions on residential real estate controlled the location of Mexican Americans based on perceived risks to property values and resulted in a form of risk containment on the value of White residential spaces.<sup>209</sup> Although the Federal Housing Administration worked at protecting the property rights of the new homogeneous White suburban communities, as a result it did not allow for people of color, specifically Blacks and Mexicans, to take part in the wealth accumulation opportunities that are realized only through housing credit and homeownership.<sup>210</sup> The redlining practices of Sacramento essentially restricted property owners the chance to engage in normal property exchanges and eventually led to the severe decline of property values in the West End real estate, these properties were predominately owned by Mexican Americans.<sup>211</sup>

#### THE LEGACY OF THE WAR

The Mexican American community, post World War II, developed a double consciousness due to the conflicting attitudes of the United States. Mexican Americans were recruited to serve and actively sought participation in ‘The Last Good War’. Upon return from fighting in this war they experienced

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<sup>207</sup> Camarillo, 78.

<sup>208</sup> Hernandez, 3.

<sup>209</sup> Hernandez, 6.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

acceptance and denial, they experienced access as well as limitations. Opportunities for social and economic mobility become available, and those who were able to take advantage found that the war did in fact improve their lives.<sup>212</sup> Yet this advancement that was experienced by part of the Mexican American community did come at price; after the war, many gains that were realized during the conflict were lost. Wartime employment disappeared, social advances regressed in certain areas, and many veterans returned to find little change, if any in societal acceptance.<sup>213</sup> Through these dualistic experiences a new consciousness was formed that would ultimately be used to guide a new generation of Mexican Americans. The discourse produced by the wartime inconsistencies of patriotism and racism significantly influenced the Mexican American civil rights movement of the 1950's as well as the Chicano civil rights movement.<sup>214</sup>

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This research has proved that the Mexican American World War II generation of the United States, and in particular of the Sacramento Valley, were not an ahistorical people. Furthermore, this historical account of the many meaningful and significant contributions and experiences of this generation work at providing an alternative historical perspective of the World War II era.

By providing a thorough examination of the historical problem of exclusion with regards to Mexican Americans in United States history, I was able to use a particular lens by which to examine this problem. The literature in this project that deals with exclusion, scholarship production, marginalization, labor segmentation, class, race and gender has played a key role in shaping my theories about exclusion. However there is still much more to be written and it is the charge of future Chicana and Chicano historians to write and continue to write about exclusion through the prism of their lives and their experiences.

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<sup>212</sup> Griswold del Castillo, 4.

<sup>213</sup> Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), 272.

<sup>214</sup> Griswold del Castillo, 74.

Northern California and specifically Sacramento is a region that seems to be consistently overlooked by White historians, but also by Chicana and Chicano historians as well, particularly during the World War II era. I wanted to document a local history of the region that closely examined not only the significant impact that Mexicans and Mexican Americans have had in Sacramento but also I wanted to document the significant impact that the region played in the war effort. I was able to highlight the importance of the military bases in the region, the role that Mexican American soldiers played in the armed forces, but also I was able to include the significant impact that Mexican braceros provided in filling the labor shortage in the region, a key fact that sometime gets lost in the general war-effort narrative.

This research was also able to highlight the importance of women on the home front. The attempt of this work was to expand on the common analysis of women as an extension of the family. Not to minimize the role that women play within the family, but I wanted to push the examination in a different direction. I wanted to look at working conditions, recruitment of women workers and working experiences that women had during this era. Additionally I wanted document and highlight the significant contributions that Mexican American women of the region had on the community. They were able to mobilize community members and successfully advocate for the Mexican American community on many different levels. I undoubtedly acknowledge that this is a limited analysis of women of the World War II generation of the Sacramento Valley, however this is my effort at consciously shifting the scholarship. Additionally, I pledge to continue this effort and urge future scholars to build on the work that I, and so many others have started.

Lastly I was able to illustrate the social impact of the war at home and what that meant for returning Mexican American GI's. The war provided many gains and many losses for this generation. It produced an opportunity for social mobility through the GI Bill and fostered the formation of several important political groups geared towards advocating for the rights of Mexican Americans. It also provided

federal and state sanctioned policies, such as redlining that worked at consciously controlling and limiting the economic and social mobility of Mexican Americans.

Ultimately this research aligns itself with other work by Chicana and Chicano scholars in an effort to seize the opportunity to tell our own story. So often the manner in which people of Mexican ancestry are depicted in United States history is distorted. The hope is that by providing this alternative account of history, students and scholars of all races will be able to construct a more accurate historical consciousness.

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