

Puestos Aparte: Inequity through Migration and Legal Segregation in San Antonio, 1900 to
1930s

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On a sunny July day in Washington D.C. in 1927, Representative John C. Box of Texas made his way in front of the House Immigration and Naturalization Committee. Yet again, he argued the need for immigration restrictions in front of his colleagues. This was not the first-time Representative Box stated similar ideals. In 1921, he posed a question to George J. Harris, a supervising inspector on the Mexican border. He inquired, “It is your judgment that the enactment of some measure providing a penalty against those who have been excluded and thereafter unlawfully enter would be the best thing that could be done to help enforce the regulations along the border?”¹ On July 23, 1927, his everlasting feeling towards Mexican migrants showed with a bright light again. He questioned the migratory actions of Mexicans² when saying, “...How is their return to be enforced? While thousands of them are dispersed over several States in the service of many employers...shall the United States Immigration guard at public expense ...if they are not thus held in custody or surveillance, what will prevent them from going where they please and staying if they please?”³ The demeaning remarks by Representative Box showcased the national sentiment that managed to trickle down into society. Statements similar to Box’s circulated the media and permeated into United States’ society.

This paper looks to bring attention to the massive waves of migration that resulted Post-Mexican Revolution, where discrimination abounded because color was crossing the border in the eyes of Anglos. I discuss the push-pull factors of migrants, in their settlement and adaptation

¹ *Immigration on the Mexican Border: Hearing before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives*, 67th Cong., 1 (1921) (statement of Mr. George Harris).

² I use Mexicans in this paper as a broad term to describe individuals with descendants from Mexico. I use the term Mexican-American only when drawing a distinction to the emerging class that results in the late 1930s. For the purposes of this paper and to keep away from confusion, Mexicans is used interchangeably with Mexican-American unless otherwise noted.

³ “Texan Decries Mexican Influx: Representative Box Strikes at Present Laxity,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1927. <https://login.libweb.lib.utsa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/162072013?accountid=7122>.

in San Antonio, and ultimately their segregation to the Westside of the city. This paper will look to the discrimination that continued Post-Stock Market Crash in the United States, in which the Great Depression resulted in Mexicans being blamed for the strenuous economy. The governmental institutions created to solve the economy's problem ultimately belittled Mexicans ability and stripped them from the possibility of upward mobility. My research looks to go beyond the common white/black binary found in historical academia. The term "legal segregation" often leads to thoughts of the Jim Crow era. Yet, the ostracizing of Mexican communities is not new. The complete stories of Mexican migrants and their lives in the United States have often been ignored, yet they have been often and easily criminalized in American society. Thus, the goal of this paper is to shed light on a common thread of discrimination faced by Mexicans as they migrated, settled, adapted, and ultimately- segregated in borderlands Texas.

Often, the United States' ideology of superiority has surpassed its own borders. Yet, the belief of superiority used by those in power has existed within its own borders, as seen with John Box in the House of Representatives. This belief of dominance came with the colonization of Stephen F. Austin's *Old Three Hundred*, which arrived in Texas after Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821. These Anglo settlers made their way to present-day Texas after Stephen F. Austin decided to fulfill his father's mission of establishing a colony in the area. A common discriminatory thread is seen when one hundred years after their arrival, institutionalized racism resulted in the mistreatment of minorities in the United States.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Mexicans migrated to the United States as they fled the economic, political, and social chaos in Mexico. This chaos was a byproduct of the tense and unstable times in Mexico. Within the United States, at the end of the nineteenth century, the railroads allowed for goods to flow from West to East. The period after the

American Civil War encompassed a time when the United States sought integration with Mexico to further the movement of cheap goods. At the same time, Porfirio Diaz, Mexico's president, decided to modernize Mexico's economy through railroad development, thus, creating a tie with its neighbor to the North. In order to accomplish this, he invited American investors to come and build the rail lines that would serve to transport goods. When Diaz took office in 1877, Mexico had roughly 600 kilometers worth of railroads. By the time he left office in 1911, there were 19,700 kilometers of railroad tracks in the country of Mexico.⁴ Despite being built in Mexico, they all ran north to benefit the United States' economy. The rail lines that were built by American investors ultimately displaced communities. Mexicans felt discontent as they lost their homes, could not feed their families, and suffered unemployment. George J. Sanchez describes, "...that Porfirio Diaz's plan to unify the nation and promote patriotism was far from successful. While the railroads did link many important regional centers...many communities remained isolated and uninterested in the national politics."⁵ The Mexican people aimed their discontent at the Mexican government, and it ultimately led to the Mexican Revolution.

From 1910 to 1917, Mexico was in disarray. A weak centralized government existed after Porfirio Diaz was deposed; Francisco Madero then came to power. His unsuccessful reign did not stabilize the country. Despite gaining power, the moderate ideologies he governed with managed to provoke a revolution because of his inability to maintain control and promote adequate change. Instead, the Revolution that ensued involved factions with different leaders. Madero, Emiliano Zapata, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, Venustiano Carranza, and Alvaro Obregon all entered the front stage of the revolution in order to try and find a sense of political

⁴ George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: ethnicity, culture, and identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

cohesiveness in the nation. For example, disorder continued in Mexico with Zapata and Villa. Zapata led an army of peasants in Southern Mexico, while “Pancho” Villa ran away From U.S. General Pershing in Northern Mexico. The instability of the Mexican government also led to a shaken economy, one in which the prices of goods rose, specifically Mexico’s staple agricultural crop: corn. By 1916, Carranza managed to gain control of all but two Mexican states. He invited reformers from the states under his control to write a new constitution addressing the various demands and reforms the Mexican people yearned for. The Constitution of 1917 included articles that spoke to the human rights of Mexican citizens and to the organization of the new government.

Despite the Revolution dying down after 1917, its effect, including geographic displacement brought about by the rail lines, led to a massive migration to the United States. This migration happened in three phases.⁶ An article published in 1920 in the *Los Angeles Times* mentioned that, “...these people come to this country...the Mexican laborers are afraid Carranza or Villa will confiscate their properties [if] they work in that country.”⁷ The U.S. received 10% of Mexico’s population due to the violence and shambled economy in Mexico during the Post-Porfifarito era. During the Revolutionary Era and the ten years that followed, two million Mexicans made the trip to *el Norte*, to cities like San Antonio. Historian Richard A. Garcia mentions San Antonio as “...a gateway to the promise of the United States.”⁸

⁶ Richard Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 32.

⁷ “Texas Flooded with Mexicans,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1920.

⁸ Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 8-9.

Three immigrant waves resulted at the turn of the twentieth century. The first ran from 1900 to 1909, and it included the loyal Mexican *ricos* that differed in political ideologies. The second wave of immigration lasted from 1910 to 1919, and it included those seeking peace from political and religious oppression. Lastly, and the one that served the city of San Antonio the most economic benefit ran from 1920 to 1929. This last group included those willing to do the laborious work of the agricultural fields found in San Antonio. Those that found themselves in this southwestern city settled permanently because of the need for unskilled labor. The need for cheap labor was so great that businessmen sent out agents across the border to proclaim the employment opportunities found in San Antonio in order to attract laborers. This worked well as much of the news began to spread by word of mouth.



⁹Figure 1. Mexican migrants being inspected at the U.S.- Mexico Border.

As time surpassed, the Great Depression solidified a struggle within the United States for those seeking employment. When the Stock-Market Crash of 1929 occurred, American citizens induced into a mode of panic. The number of unemployed individuals outweighed the number of

⁹ Philipp Kester. *USA: Border between Mexico and the USA: US border guards checking entering Mexicans*. May 1920. Ullsetin Bild. <http://www.gettyimages.com/license/548146485>

employers seeking to hire. The recent influx of Mexican migrants in San Antonio seeking labor that had been advertised gave enough reason for blame-placing to occur. Twenty-four-year-old Jesus Garza of Aguascalientes, Mexico made the trip to the United States and described San Antonio as "...pretty and there is many Mexicans. But wages are very low there and work is very scarce."¹⁰ Very quickly, Mexicans were found culpable of the economy's downfall. To white United States citizens, they were the easiest group to scapegoat. In order to entice them to leave voluntarily, the United States government carried out what is now known as Repatriation. This immigration movement resulted in many Mexicans, citizens and non-citizens, returning to Mexico. This occurred not only due to scapegoating, but because they did not find employment in the U.S. Individuals that remained faced discrimination as they settled, which Garcia refers to as dual oppression.¹¹ Meaning, they were part of a labor pool in reserve, while distinct in regard to culture and race.

As more Mexicans made their way to San Antonio, they were drawn to the Westside of the city. This part of town contained deplorable conditions. Poverty abounded because of the lack of employment. Housing conditions did not resemble the wealthy North side. Instead, they lacked plumbing and had dirt floors. The Westside did not have sidewalks and streets were not paved. To outsiders, stereotyping the area was normal. The Mexican spirit and tradition remained steadfast and different to "American" culture. But this cohesiveness of culture did not translate from within. In the eyes of Anglos all individuals with Mexican decent were seen as intruders to the mainland with a homogenous racial identity. Yet, within the Mexican community itself, there were differences. A distinctiveness ensued as some identified as Mexican, and others began to

¹⁰ Manuel Gamio, *The Life Story of The Mexican Immigrant* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 16-18.

¹¹ Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 34.

see themselves as Mexican-American. Mexican and Mexican-Americans adaptation to a new society was twofold and varied across the spectrum.

Immigration that resulted during and after the Mexican Revolution left the city of San Antonio in a unique position. Those that established themselves and settled in the city adapted differently across the board. Those that continued to support the deposed Porfirio Diaz differed from those that were quick to “Americanize,” which became more loyal to their American ties. Adaptation was not universally identical for all Mexican descendants. Those that migrated to the United States often still felt a tie to the country now South of them. Despite not being physically in Mexico, these individuals tended to remain steadfast in their loyalty, while in a country foreign to the one they identified with. Although, new ties formed within the border of the U.S., because it was quick to provide minimally paid agricultural employment.

It is important to note that the emerging Mexican-American middle class, while it may have assimilated— to a certain extent, still managed to maintain traditions. The Spanish-language abounded, food resembled that of Mexico, and religious Catholic ties all stemmed from life in Mexico at one point. As migrants to the United States, they encountered an entirely different culture, one in which they engaged on a quotidian basis. The struggle to adapt proved to be dual. While some held on to Mexican culture and values as much as possible, others began to encounter assimilation. *Ricos* remained loyal to Mexico, and if wealthy and light skinned, they benefited from the same advantages white people did. Americanization proved to be a window to opportunities, and it appealed to some Mexicans, as seen with José Robles. He left Mexico in 1917 and soon found himself abiding by American customs, which was facilitated by his white complexion and light eyes. He studied English and married a German girl.¹² On the contrary,

¹² Gamio, *The Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant*, 226.

other Mexicans did not leave the Westside because it provided all they needed. Therefore, discrimination may not have been directed on an individual basis to Westside residents, but the legality of it all kept them from leaving the Westside in the first place. They did not afford the economic stability and social acceptance to move outside of the Mexican quarters of the city. Although, this sometimes failed no matter how hard a person of color may have tried. Skin tone spoke more volumes than cultural practices. This diversity led to a complicated canvas within the Mexican and Mexican-American communities. In United States' society, whether part of the *ricos* or a part of the emerging Mexican-American middle class, both seemed to be *ni de aqui y ni de alla*. The United States government saw them as homogenous.

One hundred years after the *Old Three Hundred*, the migration that resulted occurred because of the Mexican Revolution and United States investment in Mexico. An everlasting theme of discriminatory sentiments was still seen within the U.S. The justification those in powerful governmental positions used to interpose began with the American ideology of superiority. The term "American Exceptionalism" implied that the American way was the best way and the only way. Nevertheless, the nativist system immigrants experienced soon led to legal discrimination as they settled and adapted. The United States' atmosphere held an awareness to eugenics. This scientific theory held that people of color were immediately deemed scientifically barbaric and biologically inferior in comparison to Anglos. In order to combat the vast immigration from different nationalities, the United States government implemented a variety of legislation to keep immigration to a minimum. The 1920s began the construction of "how race is made in America" for Latinos. Natalia Molina argues that the construction of race and citizenship for Mexican immigrants began in 1924, with the passage of the Johnson-Reed

Immigration Act.¹³ Although it was not the first of its kind, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act put into place a quota system. In 1927, its legacy continued as another immigration quota was enacted. The quota system placed numerical parameters on immigration. Although, it is important to note that despite these quotas being implemented, limits on immigration from Mexico did not exist because there was a continuous need for cheap labor in the Southwest. Furthermore, the creation of the border patrol solidified the tangibility of the border. The United States Border Patrol was established in 1924 in order to enforce the federal immigration legislation that was being passed at the time. As a result of programs, legislation, and nativist sentiments across the country, Mexicans that opted to stay post-Stock Market Crash of 1929, endured the legal segregation that became a predominant part of San Antonio society.

After World War I and the Great Depression, legislation was implemented to help improve the United States' economy. American citizens were left in desperation. The scarcity of money led to the inability to pay for rent and to feed families. Under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, legislation was enacted in order to save the American middle class. This vast amount of legislation is referred to as the New Deal. Regulations passed during this time helped the white majority in the nation, while ostracizing minorities due to the increasing tangibility and divisiveness of the border.

During this time period, roughly Post-Depression to the 1940s, Garcia describes, “a historical turning point in the development of Mexicans' consciousness and ideology from Mexican and immigrant to Mexican-American and citizen.”¹⁴ As Mexicans adapted to living in a nation other than the one they grew up in, or had cultural ties to, they fended for their rights as the United States' government quickly excluded them to the Westside of the city. Those in power

¹³ Natalia Molina, *How Race is Made in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁴ Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 302.

did not see a differentiation between the emerging Mexican American class and undocumented Mexican migrants. If you were brown, you were Mexican, whether born in the United States or not. As Mexican-Americans attempted to navigate their place in society, federal legislation seemed to keep pushing them back as they grappled for their rights, politically, economically, and socially.

This systematic political push back came with the Homeowner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Social Security Act of 1935. Post-Depression, those that migrated to the United States after the Mexican Revolution sometimes found their way back to Mexico, whether forcefully or voluntarily. Those that stayed behind were still seen as a threat to "whiteness." Migration that resulted after the Revolution faced opposition. Anglos feared that people of color posed a risk to their sophisticated society. As noted in the 1930 Census, the racial status of Mexicans was no longer classified under "white," but instead shifted to "other races," designated as Mexicans.¹⁵ In society, white elites gave no specification to whether an individual was Mexican or Mexican-American. To the white-majority, they saw no difference in skin tone. As immigration scholar Mae Nagai describes, "...the association of these minority groups as unassimilable foreigners has led to the creation of "alien citizens" – persons who are American citizen by virtue of their birth in the United States but who are presumed to be foreign by the mainstream of American culture, and at times, by the state."¹⁶ Because whites perceived minorities as an intrusion, whites found ways to exclude them, eventually making legal segregation principal in San Antonio, and across the country. The nationwide sentiment set the stage for the facilitated passage of legislation in the 1930s.

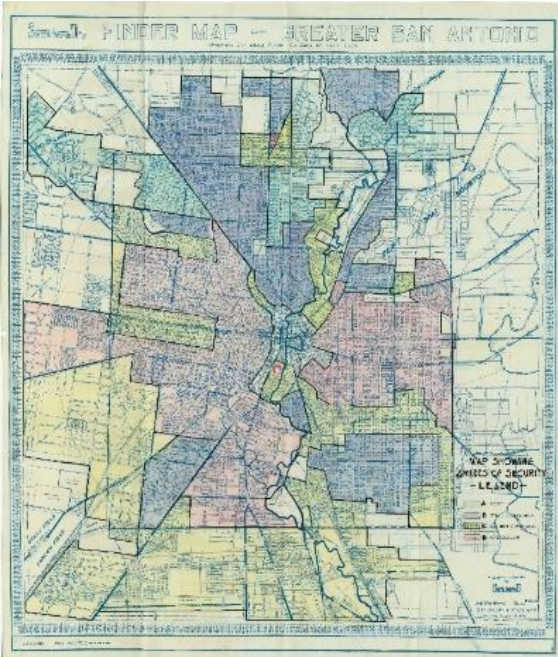
¹⁵ Lauren Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City: Heritage and Carnival in San Antonio* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 79.

¹⁶ Mae Nagai, *Impossible Subjects* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.

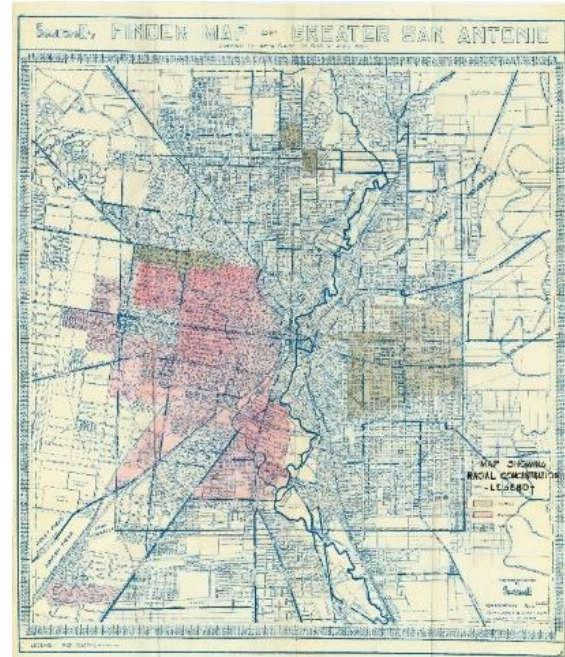
The federal government established the HOLC in 1933. Its main purpose was to refinance mortgages to prevent mass foreclosures. Racial bias presented itself in the maps that were drawn and in the evaluations of cities. The HOLC sent agents to investigate and take note of communities. When writing their appraisals, agents considered immigration status and race. The consideration of race is seen in a report regarding San Antonio in 1936 where the agent describes, “The large proportion of Mexicans, an unproductive class which constitutes a burden to the community.”¹⁷ Agents classified derogatory statements like the preceding one under “adverse” factors. Factors considered “favorable” revolved around the army posts in the city. After taking the skin color of the person in to consideration, they classified areas in the city four different ways. The finest locations in San Antonio were indicated Type A; communities classified as “still desirable” were marked Type B. If a neighborhood was seen as “definitely declining,” it was Type C. Lastly, a “hazardous” part of the city was designated Type D. The survey reports on San Antonio gave the areas minorities inhabited a bad reputation. These reports required individuals to make a compelling case in order to be considered for a mortgage

¹⁷ R.L. Olson. *HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report I*. Digital collection. Washington D.C.: University of Texas at San Antonio, 1935, pg. 20. <http://digital.utsa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16018coll12/id/35/show/2/rec/2> (accessed November 7, 2016).

loan. The correlation between racial concentrations and the grades given by the HOLC is noted in the following maps:



¹⁸ Figure 2. Grades of security.



¹⁹ Figure 3. Racial concentrations.

The more people of color in an area, the less desirable a community was, and the whiter, the more favorable a community was. The HOLC colored the redlining maps in accordance to their classification. Classification often correlated with racial concentrations in the city, showing the discriminatory process behind legislation. The HOLC colored the Mexican majority Westside of San Antonio red in both racial concentrations and in its grades of “security.” They colored the black community on the East side in black and gave it a “hazardous” classification as well.

Racial segregation resulted after the HOLC denied mortgages to inhabitants of Type D areas. As David Montejano states in his book, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, “...new

¹⁸ *HOLC San Antonio City Survey Report 2 Exhibit A: Grades of Security*. Digital Collection. Washington D.C.: University of Texas at San Antonio, 1936.

¹⁹ *HOLC San Antonio Survey Report 2 Exhibit B: Racial Concentrations*. Digital Collection. Washington D.C.: University of Texas at San Antonio, 1936.

subdivisions on the Anglo side...began to adopt restrictive covenants prohibiting the sale or rental of properties to persons other than of the Caucasian race...".²⁰ The HOLC aimed to better the economy, and yet a byproduct was the legality of segregation in San Antonio. The corporation made it difficult for minorities in the city to make it out of Type D areas. As George J. Sanchez writes, "Mexicans in the American Southwest kept many cultural practices insulated from those of the Anglo-American majority."²¹ The government made it difficult to leave an area. Therefore, Mexicans kept to themselves, and it limited cultural traditions to their "hazardous" communities. The HOLC bounded persons of color to red zoned areas and made the process to leave difficult. By coloring an area red, the HOLC made automatic assumptions regarding the economic stability of the zone that affected minorities in the future.

Discrimination of minorities continued in San Antonio through the Social Security Act of 1935. At the time, the Social Security Act aimed to provide aid for the unemployed. Minorities often did not qualify for assistance because they did not meet the requirements the act laid out. For those that remained in the United States as farm workers, the Social Security Act clearly stated, "The term employment means any service, of whatever nature performed within the United States by an employee for his employer, except Agricultural labor...".²² This made it difficult for minorities because white elites conscripted them to do the harsh field labor. Garcia defends the constant need for cheap labor by the city, which Mexicans had a monopoly on. As San Antonio moved towards and engaged in modernity, its impact "...set in motion not only the need for the communal development of the West Side, but also the process of socioeconomic

²⁰ David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the making of Texas, 1836-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 164.

²¹ Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 144.

²² U.S. Congress. House of Representatives, *Social Security Act of 1935*, sec 210.

differentiation.”²³ The exclusion of agricultural laborers was also seen in the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act.²⁴ Rather than aid those in need, it denied benefits to colored U.S. citizens.

Legislation passed during the New Deal did not aim to segregate, but in the hands of those in power, segregation became a common practice in San Antonio. The language used in both reports and government acts showed an encompassing theme of racism. The HOLC’s reports led to complications for minorities in receiving mortgage refinancing, while the Social Security Act’s terminology had clear intents that excluded agricultural laborers. In the 1920s and 1930s legal segregation was an eminent part of the city of San Antonio. Those in positions of control had the ability to influence communities by enforcing laws as they deemed necessary. Despite legislation’s goals to stabilize the economy, instability was brought upon minority communities, affecting them economically and socially. Through legislation such as the HOLC and Social Security Act, federal law affected the lives of minorities negatively.

Legal segregation during the 1930s was a corrupt system that managed to exclude the Latino community. The lasting effects of the legislation passed Post-Depression, to “save” the American economy, ended up hindering them from progression, socially and economically speaking. For example, the HOLC maps kept Mexicans from gaining certain benefits that would have kept them from poverty and hardships. Yet, the maps above managed to offer a different narrative to the refinancing market. Rather than provide assistance to people of color, they made assumptions on whether or not they could pay off their loans, based on the color of people’s skin. Thus, this hindered the population economically. It kept Mexicans from progressing on the economic ladder. Ownership of property meant wealth as it was passed down generationally.

²³ Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class*, 32.

²⁴ National Labor Relations Act of 1935

However, denying Latinos the ability to borrow money meant they never had the opportunity to gain their own wealth due to the legacies of the Federal Housing Administration. The difference economic wealth had in communities is seen in the following photographs. Figure 4 depicts the Argyle Hotel found in Alamo Heights ten years before Figure 5 was taken, which presents the deplorable living conditions found in the *corrales* on the Westside.



²⁵ Figure 4. Exterior of Argyle Hotel, Alamo Heights.



²⁶ Figure 5. A Mexican *corral*, Westside.

Legislation that passed as part of the New Deal hurt the flourishing of the Latino community. Being politically ostracized led to economic denial and social struggle. Legal segregation led to residential segregation on the Westside, which then showcased the income disparity that prevented equal opportunity from reaching all people of color. Socially, minorities were left to keep their culture secluded to their part of the city. The remainder of the city, predominantly the white men in power that made said decisions, did not want to engage in this “other” culture. They fixated their actions on the lasting theme of nativism. If they had to be in

²⁵ *Exterior of Argyle Hotel, Alamo Heights*. 1920. General Photography Collection, San Antonio Conservation Society, San Antonio. <http://digital.utsa.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p9020coll008/id/9447>

²⁶ Russell Lee, *Detail of a Mexican Corral, San Antonio, Texas*. March 1939. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

somewhat of a proximity with a minority community, they preferred that the minority community be contained into a particular part of the city. This allowed them to then avoid particular people of color enclaves. Hardships for Mexicans on the Westside also resulted because of the low-lying land, which easily flooded. Had loans been offered, relief served as good news. But those in power deemed them not worthy of receiving loans and thus, made them abide by the horrible pre-existing living conditions. The Post-Depression atmosphere on the Westside filled the streets with instability, and families barely made it by. Denial of helpful aid did not ring as good news for the Latino communities.

Mexicans found their identity in the labor fields because they were constantly being stratified into the laboring and middle class by those in positions of power. Because of this, they began to build a microcosm on the Westside, which also resulted in the differentiation between classes. Cheap labor meant miniscule wage amounts, and Mexicans were aware of that. An intersectional analysis can be unfolded here. Discrimination did not come solely because of a darker skin tone, instead discrimination also flourished because no prosperity was attainable when being forced to be part of a lower class in society, which resulted in light of economic differences. Not only were Mexican-Americans being ostracized politically, but they were also out of favor in terms of economic stability. As historian John Reynolds notes, "...San Antonio had a large pool of people who were willing to work for almost nothing, and they did."²⁷ Many Mexicans lost their agricultural jobs when Anglos used them as scapegoats during the Depression. They saw them as a threat to their own wellbeing; Mexicans therefore moved to San Antonio in search of employment. Those that found employment in the city were paid minute amounts. Labor shortages, minuscule wages, and lack of union representation meant that people

²⁷ John Reynolds, "Repatriation in San Antonio," Accessed November 7, 2016.
<http://colfa.utsa.edu/users/jreynolds/Ybarra/part5.htm>

of color were economically disadvantaged in comparison to their Anglo counterparts. As whites were given assistance through New Deal legislation, Latinos were left to empty stomachs on the Westside. As scholar, Zaragosa Vargas explains, “New Deal labor legislation became impetus for the first phase of Mexican-American labor insurgency...” when labor discrimination became prevalent in San Antonio society.²⁸ The revolts that ensued because of said discrimination penned a risk. The option to protest and be part of labor unions was present, but that risked unemployment to an already marginalized part of society. If an individual was not satisfied with factory wages and opted to leave, there were people lined up behind ready to take their place. Those that chose to protest were met with police brutality. The legal system had failed minority workers in both spheres.

Yet, an event that occurred in San Antonio shows the audacity of Latina women in the fight for equality. The women that took part in the Pecan Sheller’s strike deemed the possibility of upward mobility greater than the risk of punishment. The Pecan Sheller's Strike in 1938 showcased the response to labor discrimination. This strike responded to the oppressive conditions individuals on the Westside found themselves in when working in the pecan shelling industry. Rather than spending money on expensive equipment, they hired women to handle the last stage of work, which was carried out in poorly lit and crowded areas. Emma Tenayuca, a young activist, played a vital role in the insurgency that discriminatory legislation triggered. She was born in San Antonio in 1916. At an early age she saw the devastating effects of the Wall Street Crash in 1929 and bank closures that occurred in 1932. Tenayuca remembers a conversation with her grandfather that “...had an awful effect on me,” where he secretively told

²⁸ Zaragosa Vargas, “Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the Great Depression.” *Pacific Historical Review* 66, no.4 (1997): 554.

her that he had lost everything because of the economic downturns in the nation.²⁹ Although she was young when the triggers occurred, it prepared her for the fight she took part in 1938.



³⁰ Figure 6. Pecan Sheller's at work.



³¹ Figure 7. A mural on the Westside of Emma Tenayuca.

Tenayuca and a group of Mexican women broke down stereotypes of race and gender when they decided to walk out of their jobs as pecan shellers. The legal segregation that resulted from city reports by the HOLC left minorities in the Westside in appalling conditions. Lack of running water and toilets outside of the main living area are few examples of the conditions Latinos lived in. The strike sought to bring attention to the poverty wages, but did not stop there. They also shed light on the misery public assistance the New Deal had “promised,” the refusal to hire Mexicans in skilled jobs, and the atrocious living conditions on the West Side.³² In his book, *Blue Texas*, Max Krochmal describes the set stage the strike provided as it made its way to a more democratic institution. Krockmal details the social effects that the Westside was plagued

²⁹ Jerry Poyo, “Interview with Emma Tenayuca,” Transcript of an oral history conducted 1987 by Jerry Poyo, Institute of Texan Cultures Oral History Collection, University of Texas at San Antonio, pp 15.

³⁰ Russell Lee, *Mexican women pecan shellers at work. Union plant. San Antonio Texas.* March 1939. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

³¹ “Pecan Shellers Strike was a Major Labor Win”, *San Antonio Express News*, May 22, 2015. <http://www.expressnews.com/150years/major-stories/article/Pecan-shellers-strike-an-iconic-Great-Depression-6281620.php>

³² Mac Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016) 23.

with, one in which “The distinction between the native –and foreign born was often lost on local Anglos. As the Depression deepened, local charities and administrators in the rising New Deal all but categorically denied assistance to *mexicanos*, whether or not they were citizens.”³³

The strike sought to combat a rigged system. Although their insurgency proved to be successful in the short run when woman received higher wages, the Westside of San Antonio was still affected by economic injustice. Instead, the horrible conditions prevailed and Latinos to the West continued to live in depravity because the legal system had failed them once again. For Tenayuca herself, when asked if she made it a conscious decision to retire from labor organizing after 1939, she stated that “...it was forced on me because I couldn’t find jobs, so I left [San Antonio].”³⁴ Despite these women successfully raising the minimum wage, the struggle followed them.

They did so while combating the “communist” labels placed by the Anglo majority in the city. The United States was in a state of “containment” as they attempted to combat the ideologies found in Russia and Germany. The U.S. believed said ideologies were infiltrating its borders. To white capitalist elites, this was seen as a threat because they innately had the power to control all aspects of life through capitalist endeavors. Communism had the possibility of threatening their tight hold on economics because it had the ability to ensure equality across the board, rather than white elites always being at the top. Tenayuca sided with the Communist Party solely because it was the faction that managed to acknowledge the rights of Mexican laborers, which other political parties did not do. The startled white majority managed to criminalize anyone that hurt their ideals of financial security. They did so with the strikers on the Westside that amassed to fight the injustice that resulted from federal legislation.

³³ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 22.

³⁴ Jerry Poyo, “Interview with Emma Tenayuca”, 37-38.

Despite the HOLC and Social Security Act being implemented in a different era, the same sentiment managed to trickle into present day. In the twenty-first century, gentrification has discriminated against communities of color in the inner cities. Anglos fled from the inner city of San Antonio Post-World War II, which led to the suburbanization and growth of the city. Yet, in present day, middle class investment has returned to the very places they left long ago in order to increase the property value. Ultimately, Latinos have been plagued from recurring their own property value, as was done in the 1930s. Additionally, gentrification has displaced families from the ethnic neighborhoods they know to be their own because as investment comes, value rises, and those plagued by the system can no longer afford the rising cost of the community. Displacement of minority communities is not new. Gentrification has impacted minorities negatively just as legislation in the early twentieth-century managed to do.

For example, an article published in 2016 in the San Antonio Express News showcased the average residential property value that increased in the city. When it came to the Westside, zip code 78207 saw an average change/increase of \$6,301 in property value.³⁵ This may seem like a minimal increase, but an increase on value means an increase on property tax. For this particular part of the city, the slow process of increased residential value has the power to displace, again showing the intersection of race and class. By denying them loans in the 1930s, Latinos were confined to a certain part of the city. In present day, the confined part of the city mirrors the legacies of the 1930s. Those in power see it as a betterment project. A project to “clean out” the barrios and ultimately push out its inhabitants. The HOLC pushed residents out of certain areas and left them bound to “hazardous” ones, and its effect filtered into the 2000s. It

³⁵ J.M Scott, “Map: Average residential property value increases in Bexar County ZIP codes in 2016,” *San Antonio Express News*, May 4, 2016 <http://www.mysanantonio.com/real-estate/article/Map-residential-property-value-san-antonio-2016-7392541.php#photo-9938600>.

made the process of establishing one's economic stability more difficult for minority communities. The embedded racism in the governmental system that was seen in the 1920s and 1930s differentiates from what is seen in present day, yet they are connected by a common anchor. An anchor revolved around institutionalized separation and discrimination.

The desire by political powers to modernize San Antonio at the end of the 1930s meant the Westside must be included. In order to build a prosperous and industrialized city, Mexicans would need to be included in the quest to become a borderland metropolis. Yet, even then integration was not fully wanted by those that held power. To every extent possible, Mexicans were ostracized to the Westside. However, a Mexican-American class was in the process of recognizing their place in American society and would not be run over by political elites. These Mexican Americans saw themselves as *mexicanos de adentro*. This self-realization and shift allowed for the stage to be set for the young Chicanos that took the 1960s by full force. As the population grew, their place in society was to be defined.

A borderland metropolis like San Antonio is effected by its proximity to the border, which explains the large Mexican community. But one must also take into account the role space plays in a borderland metropolis. Spatial theory, which by definition is “the study of space and place,” is evident when looking at the value placed on space- thus it becoming a place.³⁶ Value placed on space by the federal government is seen with the legacies of the HOLC. To them, the Westside was of no value until they realized it was needed in order to modernize the city, and ultimately the title of “metropolis.” But it is also important to note the value placed on space by the Mexican community, where San Antonio shares a connection with Mexico due to the lasting traditions brought by those that have migrated to the city. To the Mexican communities bound to

³⁶ Jamie Gunderson, “Introduction to Spatial Theory”, December 9, 2014. <https://sites.utexas.edu/religion-theory/bibliographical-resources/spatial-theory/overview/>

the Westside, they found value in the areas they lived in. Despite being legally segregated into an area, they managed to make the place their own.

Ana de Haro described San Antonio in the early sixties as having "...a lot of prejudice."

³⁷ This same sentiment is echoed by Richard Menchaca in an interview in which he "didn't have the sense enough to question" the "automatic segregation" of whites in the front of a bus, Mexicans in the middle, and blacks in the back. He saw the same legacies when using the bathroom downtown, where he had to search for the "Mexicans Only" sign, again showing the anomaly to a common narrative withholding a white/black binary. ³⁸ The legislation enacted and its continuous ramifications in the Latino/a community in San Antonio set the stage for the reaction that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. The movement was a response to the lasting legacy of discrimination in San Antonio society. By continuously being denied political, social, and economic assistance, the *chingo*-ness of the Mexican community boiled to the top. This is not to say that Latinos were not active in combatting a rigged system from the 1920s to the 1950s in fighting for their rights. The success of an increased wage with the Pecan Sheller's is an example. But the struggle continued. A raise in wages did not fix the systematic problem created by legislation enacted to "fix" the economy. It managed to make conditions harsher for the Mexican population in San Antonio. But the denial of certain programs and benefits from the 1920s to the 1950s is what pushed activists over the edge once the 1960s hit. Difficulties continued for the Mexican community up until that point. In one instance, Albert Pena Jr., the County Commissioner, discussed the prevailing issue of hunger in San Antonio. He mentioned

³⁷ Marilyn P. Davis, *Mexican Voices, American Dreams: An Oral History of Mexican Immigration to the United States* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990) 348-349.

³⁸ Moises Acuña-Gurrola, "Interview with Richard Menchaca: Segregated San Antonio," Oral history conducted in 2015 by Moises Acuña-Gurrola, CRBB Summer 2015, Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project.

that, “Mexican Americans face a language barrier, and like most poor people, they suffer from lack of skills and unemployment. A hard time earning means a hard time eating.”³⁹

To neglect the legacies and effects of the criminalization of immigrants and redlining of the minority community in San Antonio is to wipe out their struggles from history. It is a disservice to the lives affected negatively by federal legislation to not acknowledge their endurance as they faced political, economic, and social push-backs. The discrimination of Mexicans explored in this paper as they migrated, settled, and adapted showcased the constant pressure applied by those in positions of power, often the white American majority, which ultimately led to the set back of the Mexican community. Latinos have been forced to work harder for the same benefits and opportunities their white counterparts are easily handed- all while they are continuously pushed back by a system that never intended to include them in the first place. Latinos would not be bound to certain stereotypes and forced to jump through hoops to get the same benefits as white people had discrimination not inundated them as they crossed the border in search of a better life. By looking at the legacies of inequity in immigration legislation and housing inequality it is evident that the political powers in the United States have made a much more tempestuous process for Latinos in the quest for equality.

³⁹ “‘Hunger’ Is Still Here” *El Portavoz*, Albert A. Peña, Jr. Papers, MS 37, UTSA Special Collections.

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