THE MELESIO GÓMEZ FAMILY: MEXICAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN HOUSTON'S EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of History

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Mikaela G. Selley

August, 2013

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ABSTRACT

The Gómez family immigrated to the United States from Mexico during the 1920s. By 1937 the family was running three successful businesses on Washington Avenue in Houston's Sixth Ward: a tortilla factory, a café, and a Mexican curio store. All three establishments remained open for over three decades, closing in the late 1960s. The Gómez family story provides a case study in ethnic Mexican entrepreneurship in Houston in the early twentieth century. The family's middle-class status, their location in a multi-ethnic neighborhood, and the success of their three businesses make the family unique and broadens our understanding of opportunities for social mobility for Mexicans in Houston, the experience of Mexicans living outside of the Mexican *barrio*, and the impact of Mexican business in Houston. This thesis makes extensive use of the Melesio Gómez Family Collection at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC). The collection also includes recorded oral history interviews with the Gómez family's middle daughter Estella Reyes, conducted by HMRC in the 1970s. Her voice is used throughout this thesis along with an array of primary and secondary sources from the collection to present the little known history of this family and its role in Houston's Hispanic history.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: From San Luis Potosí, Mexico to Houston's Sixth Ward	21
Chapter 2: La Nacional Tortilla Factory	46
Chapter 3: La Consentida Café	64
Chapter 4: The Mexican Products and Curio Shop	86
Conclusion	109
Bibliography	115

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Studio portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Melesio Gómez, Houston, Texas, 1949 23

2. Melesio Gómez in band uniform, Southern Pacific Lines, Houston, Tex. 1924 29

3. Table of Estimated Mexican Population in Houston, 1900-1930 32

4. Street Map of Houston, 1920s, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Texas 41

5. La Nacional Tortilla Factory. From right to left: Estella Gómez, Rita Coronado, and Lupe Guerra, Houston, Texas, 1950s 47

6. Washington Avenue scene in front of La Nacional Tortilla Factory, Houston, Texas, 1944 53

7. La Consentida Café Flyer, 1935 67

8. Meeting of Woodmen of the World (W. O. W.) of Camp Laurel at La Consentida. Melesio Gómez is second from right, Houston, Texas, 1940 69

9. Birthday celebration of Melesio Gómez in La Consentida Restaurant, Houston, Texas, 1946 72

10. La Consentida Café menu, 1949 75

11. A picture of Estella Gómez while she was in high school, Houston, Texas, 1929 87

12. Estella Quintanilla Gómez in ' Mexican Products and Curios,' Houston, Texas. 1939 91

13. Women lined up at Chapultepec picnic in San Jacinto Battle Grounds, Estella Gómez is second from right, San Jacinto, Texas, 1932 105

Introduction

In the mid-1970s Estella [Gómez] Reyes, heeding a call from the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC) for materials relating to the Hispanic history of Houston, contacted the archive regarding her family's story. She stated simply that her materials were "important." Upon acquisition of the materials, the HMRC named the collection after her father, and Thomas Kreneck (former archivist of the HMRC's Mexican American archival component) praised the Melesio Gómez Family Collection as the most significant case study of the Mexican American family experience in Houston and called it a "microcosm of Hispanic Houston during those years."[1] The Gómez family immigrated to the United States from Mexico during the 1920s. By 1937 the family was running three successful businesses on Washington Avenue in Houston's Sixth Ward: a tortilla factory, a café, and a Mexican curio store. All three establishments remained open for over three decades, closing in the late 1960s. The history of the Gómez family offers insight into the experience of Houston's early twentieth century Mexican American entrepreneurs. The family's middle-class status, their location in a multi-ethnic neighborhood, and the success of their three businesses make the family unique and broaden our understanding of opportunities for social mobility for Mexicans in Houston, the experience of Mexicans living outside of the Mexican barrio, and the impact of Mexican business in Houston. Included in this collection are five recorded oral history interviews with Reyes conducted by Kreneck between 1979 and 1981. Roughly seventy years of age, she tells her family's story in the interviews with a sharp memory and obvious pride in her family's accomplishments. Her voice is used throughout this thesis

[1] *In Search of Houston's History*, DVD, directed by Jim Bailey (Houston: Sunset Productions, 2008).

along with an array of primary and secondary sources to present the little known history of this family and its role in Houston's Hispanic history.

Despite their many successful business ventures, little is known about Melesio Gómez and his family. Just a handful of scholars have referenced the Gómez family. Arnoldo de Leon's *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, a pivotal work on Houston's Mexican American community, uses Estella Reyes' records briefly to discuss the Club Femenino Chapultepec (a Mexican women's social club in Houston) and the harsh social conditions for the Mexican *colonia* (urban Mexican population in the city).[2] He also discusses the significance of Houston's Mexican and Mexican American middle-class businessmen, but does not include a detailed study of Melesio Gómez.[3] As De Leon explains, a Mexican and Mexican American business class began to take shape in Houston in the 1920s when the Mexican population had reached roughly 10,000. Many of these early entrepreneurs had been well established in Mexico prior to their move to Houston and brought with them their knowledge, experience, and education.

Houston's rapidly growing Mexican population was in need of a variety of goods and services as the majority Anglo society was not catering to them. Thus, there were significant opportunities for Mexican business owners. These early entrepreneurs included doctors, druggists, grocery store owners, print shop keepers, and jewelers. What we know about these Houston Mexican *comerciantes* (business owners) comes mainly from De Leon's description of José Sarabia. José Sarabia, a Mexican immigrant from the state of Guanajuato, Mexico was one of Houston's premier Mexican entrepreneurs. He

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[2] Arnoldo De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 70.

[3] While the Melesio Gómez Family Collection did exist at the time De Leon was conducting research, this collection was not processed.

was one the first Mexican business owners in Houston and was well known and established within the Mexican *colonia*. Sarabia, along with his brothers, opened *La Libreria Hispano-Americana*, a combination curio chop, library and printing establishment on Congress Avenue in the heart of Houston's Mexican commercial district. Sarabia also published and edited the *Gaceta Mexicana*, a newspaper dedicated to the promotion of Mexican business and culture. In 1927, he then opened *El Teatro Azteca*, Houston's first Spanish-language theatre and later movie-house. The little that is known about him comes mostly from the *Gaceta Mexicana*. Sarabia used the newspaper to promote a loyalty to Mexico and Mexican culture while living in the United States. From De Leon's research we understand that, generally speaking, Houston's early Mexican businessmen shared Sarabia's ideology.

Through its description of Mexican businessmen like Sarabia, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt* provides the historical context through which to analyze Melesio Gómez. According to De Leon's analysis, Mexican businessmen in Houston largely promoted a Mexican nationalist identity by funding the social and cultural events that celebrated Mexico, they were against the full acculturation of the Mexican people into American society, and they lived in the Mexican barrios. Melesio Gómez, however, does not fit this mold. Rather than promote a Mexican nationalist identity, he in fact embraced American culture. Upon arriving to Houston, Gómez never had any intention of returning to Mexico. According to Reyes, her father wanted to establish himself in the United States and become a U.S. citizen. She recalls him frequently stating "If you cannot do anything else, respect the law of this nation that is so good to us." This does not, however, imply that Gómez then denied his Mexican culture. Throughout his life he made frequent trips

to his hometown and funded the establishment of a school in San Luis Potosí. Reyes' description of her father's embracement of American culture and coexisting dedication to his hometown in Mexico broadens our understanding of Houston's early Mexican business owners and reflects a more diverse group than previously assumed.

In addition, Gómez provides a case-study of the Mexican residents who chose to live and do business outside of Houston's Mexican barrios. When Gómez arrived in Houston in 1919 the Anglo, African American, and various ethnic populations were interspersed throughout the city. There were however distinct ethnic enclaves that were developing. The largest concentration of Mexicans lived east of downtown in Second Ward and Magnolia Park. Gómez chose to live and establish his business on the west side of downtown in the Sixth Ward, a multi-ethnic neighborhood with only a small pocket of Mexican residents. While the Mexican population in this neighborhood would continue to rise, the family's choice to live here placed them in an entirely different social context compared to those living in the Mexican barrios. Not only did this place the Gómez family farther away from the institutions and venues that catered to the Mexican population (such as Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church), but they were more frequently exposed to other races and ethnic groups. Thus, unlike the majority of Mexican business owners who established themselves in or near the Mexican barrios on the east side of downtown, the Gómez businesses were able to tap into the non-Mexican market. In fact, as Chapter Two discusses, the tortilla factory came to rely more heavily on Anglo customers than Mexican ones.

Melesio Gómez's business strategy to focus his energies in the Sixth Ward makes him unique. This thesis adds to the limited information we have about the Sixth Ward and

places it in the context of the Mexican American experience in Houston. Tyina Steptoe's excellent dissertation "Dixie West: Race, Migration, and the Color Lines in Jim Crow Houston" discusses the Gómez family's impact on the growth of the Mexican population in the Sixth Ward.[4] Steptoe gives credit to the family's multiple businesses for providing something familiar to Mexicans moving into the neighborhood. In her discussion of the Gómez family's place within the larger context of blurred color lines and social space in Houston, Steptoe only focuses on their interactions with the Mexican population. My research adds to this work by providing specific examples of how the family navigated Houston business and social space and how Houston's blurred color lines allowed for social and business relationships with the Anglo community.

At the heart of the Gómez family experience was their middle-class status, Mexican ethnicity, and the perceptions of Mexicans in Houston during the early twentieth century. The Gómez family's experience was largely defined by their middle-class status.[5] This status afforded both families opportunities unavailable to most Mexicans in Houston at this time. For the Gómez family these included secondary and higher education for their middle daughter, better housing conditions, and leisure income. While the family experienced social mobility and enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle they were still very aware of racist attitudes and their second-class treatment. After all,

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[4] Tyina Steptoe, "Dixie West: Race, Migration, and the Color Lines in Jim Crow Houston" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008).

[5] For sources on the Mexican American middle-class see Richard García, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991); Francisco Jiménez, *Ethnic Community Builders: Mexican Americans in Search of Justice and Power: The Struggle for Citizenship Rights in San Jose, California* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2007); Richard García, "The Making of a Mexican American Mind, San Antonio, Texas, 1929-1941: A Social and Intellectual History of an Ethnic Community" (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 1980); John Tutino, *Mexico and Mexicans in the Making of the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

Houston was very much a part of the Jim Crow South and socioeconomic status did not change one's skin color.[6] As a young woman Reyes co-authored a document describing the issues facing all Mexicans in Houston and in Texas including discrimination encountered when seeking jobs, housing, and rental space for activities. Countering this negative experience however was an interest in Mexican culture and food by the larger white society on a national and local scale. As business owners selling Mexican products via their tortilla factory, café, and curio shop the Gómez family found opportunity for success because of their Mexican ethnicity.

Besides those described in De Leon's *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, few other Mexican entrepreneurs have received scholarly attention. Thomas Kreneck's *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1966*, is the only existing book to provide in-depth analysis of a Houston Mexican American entrepreneur.[7] Felix Tijerina is one of the most famous Mexican entrepreneurs in Houston's early twentieth century history, aside from the more recent business owners of the 1970s and forward. Tijerina built an empire around his Felix Mexican Restaurant chain. He started as a busboy in Houston's first Anglo-owned Mexican restaurant and within seven years moved up the ranks to establish his own restaurant. Although influenced by Houston's first Mexican entrepreneurs like Sarabia, Tijerina followed the lead of the Anglo restaurant owners he worked for and sought to tap into the Anglo market for Mexican food. By strategically placing his restaurants outside of the Mexican barrios Tijerina was

[6] For race relations in Houston during the Jim Crow era see Tyina Steptoe, "Dixie West." For the African American experience in Houston see Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1992); Bernadette Pruitt, "For the Advancement of the Race: The Great Migrations to Houston, Texas, 1914-1941," Journal of Urban History 31, no.4 (May 2005): 435-478.

[7] Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001).

successful in gaining a large Anglo customer base and was in fact popular and well-liked among Houston's white elite. He used his fame and prominence in the city to establish schools for Mexican youth. His leadership in the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) further allowed him to serve the Mexican community and use his prominence to benefit causes for civic activism. Tijerina was one of many entrepreneurs and civic leaders across the United States to emerge from the 1930s.

Kreneck's biography of Tijerina provides insight into the Mexican restaurant business in the early twentieth century and Houston's perceptions of Mexican food and products. While Tijerina was not the first to open a Mexican food restaurant in Houston specifically for white customers, he was the first Mexican American to do so. Due to the negative perceptions of Mexican-owned restaurants (and Mexican-owned businesses in general) at this time, Tijerina employed several strategies to gain success with this customer base. One of his many business strategies was to alter the cooking of Mexican dishes to use less spice. The success and popularity of the Felix Mexican Restaurant chain had an impact on white Houstonians' perception of Mexican-owned restaurants. At the peak of Felix's success, Gómez's La Consentida Café experienced a major shift in clientele from Mexican patrons to Anglo patrons. This thesis builds on Kreneck's work by adding to our understanding of how Mexican food and culture was perceived in Houston and what this meant for those business owners like Gómez.

Building on the research done by De Leon, Steptoe, and Kreneck this thesis broadens our understanding of the diverse Mexican business experience in Houston. This thesis also adds to the larger historiography of Mexican American Studies and Chicana/o Studies. The field of Mexican American history emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

Chicano scholars focused on the retention of Mexican culture by migrants to the U.S. as positive evidence of a distinct people who often identified themselves in opposition to the majority Anglo society.[8] This stood counter to the prevailing view of Anglo social scientists whose focus on the immigrant population bemoaned their retention of traditions as indicators of failed assimilation.[9] The scholarship in the Mexican American Studies and Chicana/o Studies fields during its first few decades (1960s-1980s) was politically driven, as most scholars were products of the Chicano Movement. As founders of this field, they were challenged to recover and reconstruct a neglected history. Their priorities included the correction and insertion of the Mexican and Mexican American story into the dominant narrative of U.S. history. This story, however, was one that unfortunately promoted the idea of a homogenous Chicano community: a mostly poor and working class community in constant struggle, with few variations in cultural retention and thus no variations in identity.[10] Subsequent generations of scholars are building on these foundations with a much different focus. Most works of the 1990s and forward reflect the desire to show the diversity of Chicana/o historical experiences, thus challenging the concept of a homogenous Chicana/o community.[11] In this way, recent scholars have

[8] See Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California 1848-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Richard Griswold de Castillo, "La Raza Hispano Americana: The Emergence of an Urban Culture Among the Spanish Speaking of Los Angeles, 1850-1880" (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1974); Manuel P. Servin, ed., *The Mexican Americans: An Awakening Minority* (Beverly Hills, CA: Glencoe Press, 1970); and Manuel P. Servin, ed., *An Awakened Minority: The Mexican Americans,* 2d ed: (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Glencoe Press, 1974).

[9] See Leonard Broom and Eshref Shevky, "Mexicans in the United States: A problem of Social Differentiation," *Sociology and Social Research* 36, no. 1 (1952): 150-158.; Celia S. Heller *Mexican American Youth: Forgotten Youth at the Crossroad* (New York: Random Houston, 1966); Joan W. Moore *Mexican Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

[10] See Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society*; Vernon M. Briggs, Walter A Fogel, and Fred H Schmidt, *The Chicano Worker* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977).

[11] The following are examples of works that demonstrate an interest in the diversity of the Mexican American historical experience. See Anthony Quiroz, *Claiming Citizenship: Mexican Americans in Victoria, Texas*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); José M. Alamillo. *Making*

deviated from the victimology scheme and are focusing on historical moments of resistance (and "alternative resistance") and varying individual experiences.

Gómez, a middle-class entrepreneur whose allegiance to the United States and his concern for his hometown were equally important to him, and his daughter Reyes, who was writing letters against discrimination at the same time she was selling piñatas to Anglo customers, defy simple categories of a purely Mexican or purely American identity. While my thesis is not directly focused on identity, it is an unavoidable topic throughout this work. This theme is informed by recent scholarship that argues that Mexicans in the United States were negotiating more complex identities. George Sanchez's *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* analyzes the cultural adaption of Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles during the early twentieth century. He argues that ethnicity was not a static set of traditions carried over from Mexico but instead was created through daily experiences in the United States.[12] While other works have placed American and Mexican identities as polar opposites to explain Mexican American ethnicity as a subculture between two

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Lemonade Out of Lemons – Mexican American Labor and Leisure in a California Town 1880-1960 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries – Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S. – Mexico Borderlands* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation 1916-1939* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Raúl Ramos, *Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio, 1821-1861*(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); For works on Mexican women's experiences see Martha P. Cotera, *Diosa y Hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the United States* (Austin: Information Systems Development, 1976); Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enriquez; *La Chicana: The Mexican American Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Vicki L. Ruiz, *FromOut of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Alma M. García, *Narratives of Mexican American Women: Emergent Identities of the Second Generation* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2004).

[12] George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10.

impermeable cultural poles, Sánchez describes the malleability of both cultures.[13] Like Sánchez, historian Monica Perales also discusses the invention of culture and the creation of a new Mexican American identity. In *Smeltertown,* Perales covers the history of a Mexican working-class community formed near the ASARCO smelter in El Paso, Texas.[14] She argues that Mexicans navigated through two worlds: one made by the company and one they created based on daily interactions and relationships with one another. Similarly, the Gómez family's identity was constantly being shaped by their daily interactions as business owners. They struggled to reconcile their status as second-class citizens and their role as business owners selling products to the very community that relegated them to such status.

Writings of the Mexican American work experience in the United States have tended to focus on limited job opportunities, exploitation, discrimination, and activism on the job.[15] The emphasis has been on the struggles of the ethnic Mexican as an employee focusing on the struggle to find jobs, achieve economic mobility, and form unions or mutual aid societies. Much of the scholarship consists of case studies that focus on a city, region, or specific industry. The analysis of the common worker (whether he or she be a migrant worker in California or industrial worker in Detroit) made significant

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[13] Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American, 6.*
[14] Monica Perales, *Smeltertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
[15] Examples of writings that look at labor unionism and activism include Francisco Rosales, "Chicano Steel Workers and Unionism in the Midwest," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 6, no. 2 (1975): 266-275; Frank P. Barajas, "Resistance, Radicalism, and Repression on the Oxnard Plain: The Social Context of the *Betabelero* Strike of 1933," *Western Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 28-51. Select works on Mexican American women labor activists include Zaragosa Vargas, "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement During the Great Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (November 1997): 553-580; Vicki L. Ruiz, "Una Mujer Sin Fronteras: Luisa Moreno and Latina Labor Activism," *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 1 (February 2004): 1-20.

contributions to the historical record.[16] The equating of "Mexican American" with the "common worker," however, leaves out due recognition of the significant number of ethnic Mexican who owned businesses and self-employed individuals that have existed since the early twentieth century. Scholarship from the 1990s to the present reflects a desire to tell this other story. For example, George Sánchez's *Becoming Mexican American*, Gabriela Arredondo's *Mexican Chicago: Race Identity, and Nation 1916-39*, and Richard García's *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio 1929-1941* place their discussions of Mexican-owned businesses within this larger context of the emerging middle-class of the 1930s in Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Antonio respectively.[17]

These scholars agree that the growth of the Mexican population in the first decades of the twentieth century created opportunities for entrepreneurs to cater to an emerging market. Mexican-owned businesses helped to maintain a connection to Mexico and therefore a connection to a Mexican identity in an American urban environment, and that authenticity could be (and was) sold. In particular, Sánchez discusses how in the face of little to no economic advancement elsewhere, Mexican musicians were entrepreneurs who used appeals to Mexican nationalism to sell a product (*corridos* or Mexican folk

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[16] For a general survey on Mexican Americans in the labor force see Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Mexican American Labor, 1790-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994). Sample works that focus on specific industries include Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1918-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Studies that focus on workers in the agricultural sector include W.K. Barger and Ernesto M. Reza, *The Farm Labor Movement in the Midwest: Social Change and Adaptation Among Migrant Farmworkers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); Devra Weber, *Dark-Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[17] Gabriela Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-39* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2008); Richard García, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio 1929-41* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991). Also see De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey.*

songs).[18] Arredondo does not focus on a particular type of Mexican-owned business, but instead discusses them in terms of their competition with other ethnic groups for Mexican customers in Chicago.[19] Finally, within his analysis of the rise of LULAC in San Antonio, García describes the political obligation placed on Mexican American business owners by LULAC to help modernize the Mexican community and work with the Anglo political voice.[20] Although the books mentioned thus far dedicate portions of their work to ethnic Mexican entrepreneurship and business owners, they place them in the background of the narrative. One is aware that there are stores that cater to the Mexican community owned by Mexicans, but further analysis is missing.

Another contribution to this topic is Carlos Cuellar's *Stories from the Barrio: A History of Mexican Fort Worth*.[21] Like the aforementioned works, *Stories from the Barrio* is a community history. However, the author covers a much longer time period of about one hundred years (1880-1980). In his third chapter entitled "Making a Living," Cuellar uses the Fort Worth city directory to analyze the occupations of ethnic Mexicans and the labor trends in the earliest *barrios*. He lists many business owners whose occupations were listed as "tamale peddler," "lunch stand," "chile stand," "barbershop," and "tailor." *Stories from the Barrio* is similar to the works of Sánchez, Arredondo and García in its recognition of the geographic limitations set upon Mexican business owners, and in its placement of business owners in opposition to the typical labor experience for Mexicans. Cuellar's book stands out among the works listed so far, however, in that he makes note of the high number of Mexicans who attempted to open restaurants in

[18] Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 171-187.
[19] Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago.*
[20] For Felix Tijerina's role in LULAC see Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*.
[21] Carlos Cuellar, *Stories from the Barrio: A History of Mexican Fort Worth* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2003).

comparison to any other type of businesses. Cuellar only states that they had marketable skills to offer, but the exact details of these endeavors are missing.

The fourth chapter of this thesis is dedicated to telling the story of Estella Reyes, Gómez's middle daughter and manager of the Mexican Products and Curio Shop.[22] There is a small but growing body of scholarship on Mexican American female entrepreneurs. Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten dedicate a section of their encyclopedic and valuable work *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* to the experience of Mexican women living in urban Texan cities.[23] The authors' description of several women who were able to earn a living working for themselves during the 1920s through 1940s provides the context for Reyes' own story. In addition to her role as an entrepreneur, Reyes was an active member of Club Femenino Chapultepec. Emma Perez's *Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* discusses this club and Reyes' activism.[24] Perez places Reyes' story in the broad context of how Mexican women used social clubs to create a comfortable space for themselves within a hostile and prejudiced environment.[25]

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[22] All three of Gómez's daughters were affected by the move to Houston and the success of the family tortilla factory and café. The eldest daughter Elvira Gómez was married at age 17 after just five years of living in Houston. Soon after, she moved to Minnesota with her husband and opened a successful restaurant called La Casa Coronado. It was open for roughly three decades. Elvira gained fame in the area for her establishment and was affectionately called by many patrons "Mama Coronado" or the "Queen Mama." Not much is known about Mary Anne Gómez, the youngest Gómez daughter, besides the fact that she worked in the family restaurant. Mary passed away in 1967 (she was about 47 years old). Estella Gómez (Reyes), the middle daughter, was the only child to establish a business in Houston. The Mexican Products and Curio Shop opened just five years following the opening of the family restaurant, and was located on the same block. Reyes lived and breathed the city's Mexican American social scene was very active in Houston. She was the first Mexican American female to graduate from Sam Houston High School and formed the first social club in Houston for young Mexican American women. She was outspoken against discrimination faced by Mexican Americans in Houston and Texas and at the same time was well-liked in the Anglo community for her participation in YWCA activities and her successful Mexican curio shop. Because of Reyes' role in Houston the fourth chapter of this thesis is dedicated to her story and the significance of her business.

[23] Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten, *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

[24] Emma Perez, *Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999).

[25] Ibid, 79-81.

Mexican women, like Reyes, had to balance two very different roles: that of a business owner and of an activist. While Perez does not address Reyes' entrepreneurship, there are several authors who address Mexican women's multiple roles and provide a framework for understanding Reyes' experience. Mary Ann Villarreal's dissertation "Cantantes y Cantineras: Mexican American Communities and the Mapping of Public Space" follows the lives of several Mexican American women *cantantes* (singers) over a period of five decades beginning in the 1920s.[26] Gloria Duarte's "Josefa Lara Camuñez: Mexican American Businesswoman" is the biography of a Mexican female restaurant owner in Texas during the early 1900s.[27] Villarreal and Duarte's works offer a framework for analyzing Mexican women who are caught between two roles by illustrating the power gained from a professional life and how these women had to negotiate family life. Additionally Gabriela González's analysis of Carolina Munguía in "Carolina Munguía and Emma Tenayuca: The Politics of Benevolence and Radical Reform," provides the basis for understanding middle-class Mexican women's activism.[28] Like Munguía, Reyes' activism was mild and her perception of what women should do to fight discrimination was directly tied to her middle-class background.

Organization of Thesis

The Gómez family story came to my attention as I was deciding which Hispanic archival collection to process during my graduate internship. The brief description

[26] Mary Ann Villarreal, "Cantantes y Cantineras: Mexican American Communities and the Mapping of Public Space" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2003).
[27] Gloria Duarte, "Josefa Lara Camuñez: Mexican American Businesswoman," *Journal of Big Bend Studies* Vol. XVIII (2006).
[28] Gabriela González, "Carolina Munguía and Emma Tenayuca: The Politics of Benevolence and Radical Reform," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 24, 2 (2003), 200-229.

provided by the HMRC explained this family owned a restaurant and that Gómez worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad after fleeing the Mexican revolution. While these were true statements the description did not convey the breadth of the collection materials nor did it capture the family's unique story. Nonetheless, I was intrigued and curious to learn more and the HMRC was eager to process Hispanic archival material. Upon organizing the collection at the item-level, I came to see the Gómez family collection for its true historical value and chose it as my thesis topic. Having such intimate insight into the collection has informed this thesis in several ways including the organization of the chapters and my interpretation of the oral histories. The Gómez family collection had not been organized according to any particular theme or logic; so I was not influenced by anyone else's thoughts on how this family's life should be structured for research. Had it been organized chronologically for example, my logic for this thesis and my analysis might have taken a very different approach. Instead I let the materials speak to me. What I heard was the story of a Mexican family whose three businesses each experienced such very different relationships with Houston's Mexican and white residents at different points in time. Consequently, this thesis is organized thematically.

The first chapter will introduce the Gómez family and how they came to settle in Houston. A description of Houston and the Sixth Ward at the time of their settlement provides a clear picture of the opportunities the Bayou City afforded the Gómez family as business owners and why the Sixth Ward was significant. The next three chapters cover each of the family businesses separately. Chapter Two focuses on La Nacional Tortilla Factory and the demand for Mexican food products from within and outside the *colonia*. I analyze the location of the factory and Gómez's business approach as key factors to its

success among Houston's white patronage. Chapter Three examines the history of La Consentida Café and its significance as a neighborhood business. This chapter also discusses La Consentida Café's transition from serving a Mexican clientele in the 1930s to having a white customer base in later years with emphasis on the impact of Felix Tijerina on the Mexican food industry. The fourth chapter covers the history of the Mexican Products and Curio Shop run by Melesio Gómez's daughter Estella Reyes. Most importantly, it analyzes how Reyes managed her role as a business owner and her membership in a young women's social club. This thesis concludes with a discussion of why each business had varied interactions with the non-Mexican community at different times. I discuss the abrupt closing of all three businesses in the late 1960s due to illness and deaths in the family before providing suggestions for further research.

Methodology

The oral history recordings with Reyes were not transcribed. Thus, like the archival collection, I was not influenced by anyone else's interpretation before my own. Staff of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center conducted oral histories used in my research during the late 1970s and early 1980s. I did not conduct any of the interviews and I was left with only the recordings for my analysis. Listening to the recordings, as opposed to reading a transcript, allowed me to be as close to the original interview as possible. I was able to hear the silences and tones in her speech and use them to place the words in context. For example Reyes brings up World War II in several instances stating it was the cause of major changes. While she describes the changes to the businesses she does not provide more personal details. Her family's archival collection however includes

a significant number of newspaper clippings from the war period all of which contain articles referring to Mexican American soldiers from Houston. Her silence on this aspect of the war suggests that this was a difficult topic to discuss but important enough for her to place those articles in the historical record. I was also able to analyze moments of overemphasis in her story. While Reyes' statement on her family's role in influencing the rise in Mexican residents to the Sixth Ward is justified, her implying that her family was the only reason for this change in demographics reflects how important she saw her family's role in the neighborhood. Later in the oral history interview Reyes downplays Felix Tijerina's influence stating "he was not really well-known or accepted." Tijerina was in fact very well-known. Her statement reflects her perspective as a competing Mexican business owner and as one of many Mexicans living in Houston who probably never dined at a Felix Mexican Restaurant. When listening to the portion of the oral history interviews that discusses Reyes' participation in activism I sought to "listen on many registers." According to women's and Chicana/o studies scholar Maylei Blackwell, this is necessary when working with an oral history record of someone who has been censured at some point in their life as they may be negotiating their representation while telling their story.[29] As discussed in Chapter Four, Reyes was censured on two occasions and I was careful to analyze how she defends this part of her life.

Melesio Gómez did not leave behind a personal account of his life story. While the Gómez Family Collection offers newspaper clippings, an array of photographs, and business records, the only source to fill in the gaps of the family's personal story is the evidence left behind by the oral histories. The oral history method has been successful in

[29] Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 39.

capturing the history of the minority experience in the United States as there is often a lack of physical materials preserved from this group. The oral record is a complex historical document. Its popularity stems from its personal nature: "oral history sources based on memory offer up insights into the interplay between the self and society, between past and present and between individual experience and the generalized account; in addition it will often provide emotional content that a written version of the same story will not."[30] I have used the oral history interviews with Reyes to search for meaning, not just facts. I have, however, taken heed not to celebrate the storytelling at the cost of the accuracy of the content. When possible, I have used primary and secondary sources to ensure the accuracy of the parts of the oral history used in this thesis.

The experience of processing the Gómez family archival collection left me feeling connected to the family in a personal way. Knowing that this family was one of many whose collections are desperately waiting for processing and attention stirred in me a sense of duty towards this family's history. How could I process this family's collection and hear Reyes' voice without then telling their unique story? The history of the Gómez family offers new insight into the development of the Sixth Ward's Mexican population in Houston specifically and how Mexican neighborhoods are shaped in general. Their story provides a case study of the Mexican experience outside of the typical Mexican *barrio* and adds to our knowledge of the opportunities in Houston for Mexicans to achieve social mobility. Lastly, the Gómez family broadens our understanding of early Mexican business in Houston and how these businesses created positive social and economic relationships between Mexicans and the non-Mexican population.

[30] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 22.

The Gómez family found success in all three of their businesses: the tortilla factory, the café, and the curio shop. This success was directly tied to their location in Houston's Sixth Ward, their middle-class status, and the family's strategic choices for each business. While all were located on the same block of the same street, each one tells a different story and broadens our understanding of the Mexican American business experience in early twentieth century Houston.

Terminology

Throughout this thesis I use the terms Mexican, Mexican American, and Hispanic. The term Mexican refers to both Mexican nationals as well as U.S. born citizens of Mexican descent. I use the term Mexican American to refer specifically to persons of Mexican descent who were born in the United States. The word Hispanic refers to Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Central to this thesis is the concept of space and the sense of belonging to that space. I use the terms "*barrio*," "*colonia*," and "community" to describe these various physical and imagined spaces. A *barrio* is a geographic neighborhood characterized by a majority Mexican population, while I use *colonia* to refer to the urban Mexican population in the city, which comprised several *barrios*. The term community is also used interchangeably with *colonia* to refer to all Mexicans residing in Houston as well as in reference to the general Mexican population in the United States.

When speaking of the Gómez family in particular it is important to note the history behind Estella Reyes' name. The Gómez family's middle daughter, and focus of the fourth chapter of this thesis, was referred to by several different names during her

lifetime, including “Estella Gómez,” “Estela Quintanilla,” “Stella Reyes,” and “Estella Reyes.” Quintanilla was the name she acquired upon her first marriage, and Reyes she acquired upon her second and last marriage. Within the Melesio Gómez Family Collection, researchers will find that she was referred to by all these names often times at the same time by different people. For the sake of consistency and to respect the name she responded to in the oral history interviews I refer to her as Estella Reyes throughout the entire thesis.

Chapter 1: From San Luis Potosi, Mexico to Houston's Sixth Ward

The Gómez family settled in Houston, Texas between 1919 and 1921 relocating from the unstable conditions of Mexico. In some ways their story mirrors that of thousands migrating during and after the Mexican Revolution. In other ways their story is atypical. Like many of their compatriots, the Gómez family came to the Bayou City via the Southern Pacific Railroad and quickly embraced all that Houston's Mexican *colonia* had to offer by joining social and cultural organizations. Once grounded in Houston, the family saw opportunity in an expanding market for Mexican cuisine and Mexican products. Within five years Gómez moved from railcar laborer to business owner, joining the three percent of Mexicans with white-collar jobs and an emerging Mexican middle-class.

This first chapter will introduce the Melesio Gómez family. An account of their personal history in Mexico will provide the context for their move to the United States and what brought them to Houston specifically. The family entered Houston as the city was prospering economically and a Mexican community was taking shape. Gómez seized the opportunity to join the small but growing Mexican businessmen catering to this population. His decision to live and establish his businesses in the Sixth Ward, outside of the major Mexican *barrios*, placed Gómez in a unique position geographically and socially, which came to define his experience as a business owner.

An Entrepreneurial Spirit

Melesio Gómez was eight years old when he decided he needed a bank. On December 12, 1897, residents of Piotillo, a small town in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, were

in the midst of honoring Mexico's patron saint *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Festivities included an outdoor festival where vendors lined the plaza, and a circus entertained while families spent their money on foods and goods from the nearby state capital (also called San Luis Potosí). Melesio, with no change in his pocket, walked through the plaza and watched as other children eagerly spent money on the merry-go-round and sweet candies. His older sister, Filiberta, took pity and gave him the only nickel she had. It quickly became clear to Melesio that a nickel was not enough and he vowed to his sister that next year at this same time she would not find him wishing for things. He planned to work. In addition to learning the trades of carpentry and music, he spent his time during the rest of the year doing various errands for his uncles earning a little money at a time. Melesio then chose the tallest tree he could find and hid his money at the very top. Anytime he had a small amount of change, the young Melesio could be seen climbing that tree eagerly placing the meager earnings in his "bank." The sight of all the money he had saved at the end of the year had a significant impact on Melesio. It was the first time he felt the satisfaction of being able to spend his hard-earned money. This feeling of security and independence was one Gómez continuously reached for as a young man, and one that soon translated into a strong entrepreneurial spirit.[1]

In 1908 at age 19, Melesio married a woman from the same town, Sergia Martínez de Navarro, and they soon had three children. Alongside the home and irrigation system he constructed for his new family, he built a grocery store. This was his first business endeavor. Melesio and his wife sold fruits and vegetables from their land. Later he purchased more property to plant corn and beans to sell. Melesio worked the fields and also worked as a carpenter. With their daughters Elvira, Estella, and Mary,

[1] Estella Reyes, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, June 22, 1979.

Sergia helped manage the store. This "peaceful" life as Reyes described would not last for very long.[2] For the next eleven years they, along with all of Mexico, would endure the civil unrest and the violence of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Particularly traumatic events became the impetus for the family's move to the United States.

Figure 1. Studio portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Melesio Gómez, Houston, Texas, 1949, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-1, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

[2] Estella Reyes, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, June 8, 1979.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910

The revolution began with an uprising against longtime Mexican president and dictator Porfirio Díaz. Lasting until 1920, the revolt quickly turned into a multi-sided civil war.[3] The revolution was violent, and rebellions were frequent and dangerous.[4] Nearly one in seven Mexicans throughout the country died as a result of the fighting.[5] It was a common sight to see soldiers and rebel factions roaming throughout Mexico destroying towns and taking hostages. Melesio Gómez grew up during the "Porfiriato," as the era of Díaz (1876-1911) was called. A climate of political chaos existed throughout Gómez's adult life in Mexico. Between 1910 and 1919, from the time Gómez was twenty-one years old to when he eventually left for the United States at age thirty, the presidency changed hands three times. The nation saw Díaz flee the country into exile, the election of Francisco Madero and two years later his assassination, the rise of a number of revolutionary leaders and factions in various parts of the country, the election of Venustiano Carranza and the writing of a new constitution.[6] San Luis Potosí, Gómez's home state, was centrally located in Mexico, and therefore was the site of much political activity before and during the Mexican Revolution.[7] Widespread unrest in the state began in 1911 when the first armed revolutionary marched into the city; many others soon

[3] Peter Standish, *The States of Mexico: A Reference Guide to History and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), xxv.
[4] William H. Beezley, *Mexicans in Revolution, 1910-1946: An Introduction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 2.
[5] Beezley, *Mexicans in Revolution*, 14.
[6] Peter Standish, *The States of Mexico*, xxv.
[7] For a brief period, during the time of French Intervention under the presidency of Benito Juárez (1857-1872) San Luis Potosí (the city) was the capitol of Mexico. Later, Madero himself was imprisoned in San Luis Potosí in 1910 for speaking out against President Díaz. The manifesto he wrote that would be the inspiration for the early stages of the revolution was titled "Plan de San Luis." Beezley, *Mexicans in Revolution*, 56.

followed.[8] The Gómez family experienced this first-hand (although it is unknown what factions they personally encountered). Estella Reyes recalls the day sometime between 1911 and 1916 that her father was taken captive by a group of soldiers:

> …we were waiting to see who was passing through. One of those times one group came and called out all the young men in the band to get together. 'We are going to take you along with us so you can play wherever we go.' In that group my father was included and other relatives. So they got them together and took them. I just don't know what side they were on. How long they were going through the big cities, little cities, through the forests, they had them walking. They had to play whenever they wanted them to play. So they went for some time.[9]

Reyes cannot say how long her father was gone only that he escaped with other men at some point and returned home in poor condition. It was not long after he recovered that another group of soldiers came through the town. Gómez initially hid in the back of the house but eventually was forced to come out. He was taken away for the second time. Gómez was escorted downtown and forced to stand before a firing squad. He was accused of playing in the band for "the other side" and not paying dues.[10] Reyes explained:

> Filiberta Gómez, sister to my father, she was very active in the family, the head of the family because grandmother was already ill. So she told my mother 'I'm going to the plaza with the children to beg this jefe (boss) to spare my brother's life. …I have some money and I will give it him, and your children will ask for your father's life.' So we did. We begged in the plaza and he said yes. 'I'm going to let him go but don't let anyone else see him in this town ever again. If they catch him again I'm not responsible if they kill him.' So my father had to go away and be hiding in the mountains for some time. …I remember he stayed away about six months, eating whatever he found. He was afraid and he lived with a group. He got together with some other men

[8] Hector Aguilar Camín, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 45.
[9] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[10] Ibid.

> who were also doing the same thing. Hiding in the mountains so they won't catch them.[11]

The trauma that the Gómez family experienced during the revolution is unimaginable. To make matters worse, upon his return, Gómez found his warehouse burned to the ground and all corn, beans and other foods and goods were stolen. One can only imagine the overwhelming disappointment he must have felt at the sight of this destruction. The responsibility to support his wife and three daughters led him to find work outside of their small town in hopes to earn enough money to change their situation.

Gómez moved to the capital to join friends in their vegetable and fruit wholesale venture. The company loaded vegetables and fruits onto railroad boxcars and offered produce from the south to the northern cities in Mexico that had a high demand for it.[12] At this time the city of San Luis Potosí had become one of the country's most important railway junctions. The growth in commercial agriculture had a significant effect on the city's strategic position within Mexico's railway network. [13] Gómez did this for roughly three to four years, between 1915 through 1919. Reyes explained that her father would visit his family frequently, leaving gold and silver coins for savings, while her mother continued to run the store in his absence. This ensured the financial survival of the family. For Gómez, however, money could not undo the experiences his family had suffered through.[14] According to Reyes:

> My father would stay and then leave, always thinking that he wanted his family to live peacefully. He was always afraid of another revolution. He said

[11] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Dudley Ankerson, *Agrarian Warlord: Saturnino Cedillo and the Mexican Revolution in San Luis Potosí* (DeKalb, 1984), 10; In 1888 (one year before Melesio Gómez was born) the Mexican National Railroad opened and ran from Mexico City to Laredo, Texas. Two years later the Mexican Central Railroad was completed and ran from Aguascalientes to Tampico. Ankerson, *Agrarian Warlord*, 7.
[14] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.

> he didn't want us or himself to go through another one. . . He had plans that he wanted to come to the United States, establish himself, and bring us to live here. In a place where we would probably live peacefully. Not because we needed anything. We were not rich but we had everything we wanted . . . He wanted security for the family. He wanted to live peacefully . . . So with that idea he came. He left his friends and his wholesale business. He left us at home waiting for the time he would establish himself here.[15]

The Move to Houston

Why the Gómez family settled in Houston as opposed to any other city in the United States is a matter of geography, recruitment from U.S. employers, and a kinship network. Geographically, Texas is the closest border state to Gómez's home in San Luis Potosí. Analyzing Catholic Church records, scholars have determined that Houston's Mexican immigrant population in the early twentieth century came mostly from the Northeast (Couhuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas) and the north Central Plateau (San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas).[16]

The railroad lines connecting major Mexican cities to the Texas border offered countless Mexicans access into the United States and set the stage for settlement patterns in American cities. Ironically, the construction of the railroad lines in central and northern Mexico was one of Porfirio Díaz's major contributions during his presidency. Originally intended to unite Mexico, the railroad became for many Mexicans a way to flee the instability and move north of the border.[17] In addition to providing transportation the railroad offered employment opportunities in the United States.[18] In Houston, the Southern Pacific Railroad (or SP) was one of various American companies that brought a

[15]Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[16] Francisco A. Rosales and Barry J. Kaplan, ed. *Houston, A Twentieth Century Urban Frontier* (Port Washington: Associated Faculty Press, 1983), 60.
[17] Aguilar Camín, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution*, 33-36.
[18] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.

number of Mexicans to the Bayou City.[19] Socorro Sarabia, who recruited for the Southern Pacific in San Antonio, remembers in 1918 organizing as many as fifteen carloads of Mexican workers for the Southern Pacific in Houston. As of 1910, several other railroad lines in addition to the SP conveniently ran throughout all parts of the city. This allowed easy access to Mexican laborers regardless of place of residence. Almost twenty-five percent of some one hundred Spanish-surnamed persons worked with the railroad lines at this time.[20] Gómez worked as a car repairer for the Southern Pacific and was part of the Southern Pacific Railroad Band. Official band photographs include Gómez among the members for the years 1924 and 1926.[21]

[19] Arnoldo De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 26.
[20] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 9.
[21] Photograph 022, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

Figure 2. Melesio Gómez in band uniform, Southern Pacific Lines, Houston, Tex. 1924, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-4, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

A close family friend of Gómez's (a former musician for the town's band) was working for the Southern Pacific Railroad in Houston in 1919. Reyes explained that "He [Gómez] knew they had openings for Mexican men that had a trade and wanted to work

for Southern Pacific. They didn't have any trouble getting a job. Southern Pacific would bring them. I knew a family that they brought over even with their own furniture."[22] In April 1920, roughly one year after Gómez left his hometown, he was ready to bring his wife and children to the United States. According to Reyes, it was customary for Mexican laborers with the SP to receive passes for their families to travel from San Luis Potosí to Laredo and then to Houston.[23] She remembers the day her family left their small town:

> I must have been nine or ten years old and my little sister was five [Mary] and my other sister was twelve. Everyone knew we were coming to establish ourselves here…and everyone got together. …They gave use a farewell celebration. …We came here and we already were ready to live in our new country. To accept our new country and live here with my father's ideals …My father always told me if you cannot do anything else respect the law of this nation that's so good to us. We lived through it. We lived out his ideals. We tried to live out every step.[24]

By 1920, over one million Mexicans had crossed the U.S. border. For some, this move was temporary, but for many, life in the U.S. was permanent. For Gómez, the decision to migrate did not mean a complete detachment from life in Mexico. From the time he moved to Houston until the day he died in the late 1960s, Gómez dedicated a significant amount of money and time to the youth of his hometown in San Luis Potosí. He made several trips back to Mexico to fund the building of a school and to provide necessary supplies for the children.[25] Reyes explained, however, that her father never considered returning to Mexico permanently. He was determined to establish himself in Houston and run a successful business.

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[22]Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Estella Reyes, interview; Correspondence from San Luis Potosí. Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

Opportunity in the Bayou City

Houston offered opportunity for the Gómez family to succeed as business owners. When the family arrived in Houston, the city had developed into a prospering urban metropolis with a rapidly expanding Mexican population. As business owners, this meant access to a niche market with a need for goods and services. Unlike other Texas cities, Houston did not have a settled Mexican community until the late nineteenth century. In fact, the 1880 Census revealed that less than ten people of Mexican origin lived within the city limits.[26] Houston's economy at this time was based on lumber, grain, and cotton. Cheap labor for these industries as well as the railroads, warehouses and cotton gins could be found amongst the large black population. Mexicans, instead, were called to work on farms and ranches further South or in West Texas, and many headed towards San Antonio, which already had an established Mexican urban community.[27]

In Houston, a Mexican community began to take shape in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1910, the Mexican population in the city was approximately 2,000.[28] This significant growth in the number of Mexicans residing in Houston ran parallel to Houston's own development into an urban metropolis.[29] Many factors led to the city's growth. The most notable event occurred in 1901 when oil was discovered in Spindletop, just ninety miles east of Houston. This find, combined with the city's already established banking and railroad infrastructure, was a major turning point in Houston history. In 1910 the city won a federal grant to deepen the ship channel and later establish

[26] Rosales and Kaplan, ed. *Houston,* 54.
[27] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 6.
[28] Thomas Kreneck, *Del Pueblo: A Pictorial History of Houston's Hispanic Community* (Houston: Houston International University, 1989), 41.
[29] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 7; Jesus Jesse Esparza, "La *Colonia* Mexicana: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston," *Houston History Magazine* 9, no.1 (Fall 2011): 2-8.

the Port of Houston. Houston' economy was forever changed from one based on lumber, grain and cotton to one centered on oil and gas production.[30]

The city's rapid growth and need for cheap labor pulled Mexican immigrants to Houston. While the black population had sufficed just decades before, a new preference for Mexican workers had formed. This was in part due to the move of many blacks to better positions and higher standards of living.[31] Between 1910 and through the 1920s, the Mexican population continued to expand and the *barrios* that still exist today were formed.

Figure 3. Table of the Estimated Mexican Population in Houston, 1900-1930[32]

	1900	**1910**	**1920**	**1930**
Mexican Population	500	2,000	5,000	15,000
Total Houston **Population**	45, 000	79,000	139,000	292,000

An Urban Experience in Houston

The move to Houston was a major turning point for the Gómez family. The bustling urban environment offered an entirely different set of opportunities and experiences for a family who had previously only known life in a small town in Mexico. The family encountered people from diverse backgrounds for the first time. They found

[30] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 7.
[31] Ibid.
[32] The 1930 United States census is unique in that it used "Mexican" as a classification for race. This had not been done in previous census gatherings nor did it occur in the 1940 census. In these other cases Mexicans were counted as "white." U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population. The estimates listed in the chart for the other years are based on a count of Spanish-surnames. See: Mary Ellen Goodman and Don de Jarlais, *The Spanish Surname Population of Houston: A Demographic Sketch* (Houston: Rice University, 1968), 2; De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 6, 23.

space to celebrate their Mexican culture, embrace American culture, and experienced social mobility. With the positive experiences also came the negative. Like their compatriots, the Gómez family would also encounter the discrimination and racism towards Mexicans that existed in Houston and across the nation.

The Gómez family was exposed to people of different races and ethnic backgrounds for the first time. When the family arrived to Houston in 1920, the foreign-born population included roughly 1,600 Germans, 1,200 Italians, 1,000 Russians and people from several other countries. Surpassing the foreign-born population, however, was the African American community. In 1920 there were roughly 34,000 black residents in Houston.[33] Estella Reyes described spending most of her time with her sister along the Capitol Bridge and being amazed at this diversity. It was along this bridge that Estella saw an African American person for the first time.[34] At the turn of the century Houston's African American population was significantly large, comparable to such metropolitan cities as Chicago, Detroit, and New York. Houston's location in the Jim Crow South, however, affected social and race relations in the city for many generations. Although African Americans were the largest racial group after whites, they were far from equal.[35]

In addition, the Gómez family encountered a Mexican population in Houston that was already developing its own institutions and organizations to serve its needs. For example, historians of the Mexican experience in the United States have long recognized the church as a crucial institution for arriving immigrants.[36] The church provided

[33] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population.
[34] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[35] Tyina Steptoe, "Dixie West: Race Migration, and the Color Lines in Jim Crow Houston" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), 3-4.
[36] Robert Trevino, *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Also see John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The*

religious and cultural support to a minority that was excluded from Anglo and other ethnic churches. In Houston, Mexicans turned to Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church was deliberately situated in Second Ward, near the city's most concentrated Mexican population. Founded in 1912, Our Lady of Guadalupe was created specifically because Anglos and other ethnic groups refused to worship with Mexicans. The nearest Catholic Church to the Gómez family residence was Saint Joseph's, located at the intersection of Houston Avenue and Kane Street in the Sixth Ward. It was known, however, that Saint Joseph's, organized for Italian immigrants in the early 1880s, did not welcome Mexican parishioners during the 1910s through 1930s.[37] By 1923, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church served roughly four thousand parishioners. By 1930 it had become Mexican Houston's most important religious institution as the city's only "Mexican" Catholic Church.

Our Lady of Guadalupe served as a welcoming and familiar setting for Houston's *colonia* and thus became a cultural as well as a religious institution. In addition to weekly mass services, the church catered to the Mexican cultural traditions of Catholicism including the celebration in veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In this way the church offered a space to maintain strong ties to Mexican culture.[38] Participation in the church was a significant part of the Gómez family's experience in Houston. The Gómez family attended church services at Guadalupe Church.[39] Gómez played for the church band and

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Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Monica Perales, *Smeltertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

[37] Natalie Garza "The 'Mother Church' of Mexican Catholicism in Houston," *Houston History Magazine* 9, no.1 (Fall 2011), 14-15.

[38] Ibid, 18.

[39] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*; Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 44;

the family participated in the many *jamaicas* (festivals) and fundraisers, for which they frequently donated tortillas from their factory. In 1925 their eldest daughter Elvira Gómez married Arturo Coronado at Our Lady of Guadalupe.[40] In 1932 Our Lady of Guadalupe established a sister church, St. Stephen's Catholic Church (San Esteban) to serve the Sixth Ward residents.[41] Reyes recalled participating in the fundraising activities for the building of this church and the family soon attended mass at both Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Stephen's.[42]

The church brought the Gómez family and other Spanish-speaking residents in Houston into close contact with different Mexicans from all backgrounds and across the socioeconomic spectrum. Some were working class immigrants or upper class exiles from Mexico. Others were native born from various parts of Texas ranging from first generation to those whose parents settled in the United States long before the revolution.[43] The established clubs and organizations of the 1920s and 1930s reflected this diversity: some claimed a loyalty to Mexico while others claimed a more American, or oftentimes Texan, identity.

Melesio Gómez's participation in social organizations reflects how class and ethnicity shaped his sense of self in Houston. Mutual aid societies were common among ethnic and minority groups across the United States because they were denied access to traditional networks of financial and fraternal support. These lodges offered security in the form of life insurance and also functioned to provide fraternal companionship to

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Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 110-111; Estella Reyes, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, August 15, 1979.
[40] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8 1979.
[41] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 57.
[42] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[43] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 11.

Mexican Houstonians. Given his recent immigrant status, one might have expected Gómez to join *La Sociedad Mutualista Mexicana "Benito Juarez." La Sociedad Mutualista Mexicana Benito Juárez* formed in 1919. Based in Magnolia Park *La Sociedad Benito Juárez* consisted of working-class Mexicans. Part of their mission was to provide "some sense of familiarity in an adopted world" and most importantly they were not interested in assimilation or Americanization, thus it appealed to recent immigrants who hoped to return to Mexico. Everything about the group expressed a cultural allegiance to Mexico. Their name Benito Juárez was in honor of the former president of Mexico who held the country together during the 1850s and 1860s despite invasion by the French. In addition to serving their members with financial security, they stressed Mexican ideals and values.[44] *La Sociedad Benito Juárez* in no way expressed a bicultural identity.

Instead, Gómez became an active member of the mutual aid society Woodmen of the World (or *Leñadores del Mundo*). It is unclear to which chapter or lodge Gómez belonged but all followed the same philosophy and ideology.[45] His membership in this society would later aid him during the critical economic hardships of the Great Depression. The *Leñadores* attracted those of middle-income status; many of whom, like Gómez, were Masons. While the WOW lodges were a significant part of the *fiestas patrias* (patriotic festivals that celebrated Mexican national holidays) they were not a Mexican oriented mutual aid society and for the most part did not appeal to new arrivals from Mexico. Gómez was a recent immigrant, however, and his membership in a group

[44] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 32-33.
[45] There also existed *El Campamento Laurel* #2333, the earliest known Mexican organization of this type in Houston formed (1908). Additionally, by 1920 there existed *El Campo Roble, No,. 6* and *El Campamento Navidad* 3698 formed in 1932.

that did not express *"lo mexicano"* to the degree that other groups did reflects the diversity of the immigrant experience and the importance of class. Class shaped Gómez's sense of self by providing him with options. He had the option to seek financial security with others who were doing well. When given a choice (as opposed to having only one "Mexican" church available) having financial security and trust with members of his own socioeconomic class took precedence.

While promoting an allegiance to Mexico while in the United States was not a priority to Gómez, ethnicity shaped his sense of self because there was room in Houston to express cultural pride in various ways. In fact Gómez frequently participated in the celebration of Mexican national holidays in Houston. Having pride in one's culture, however, is entirely different from promoting an allegiance to Mexico and it was not his main focus. Thus Gómez's choice to join WOW gives a clear picture of who he was and what was important to him. In fact his membership in WOW reflects an approach to life that focused on the well-being of his family and businesses. He was not concerned with making a statement about ethnicity or any other issues of the day for that matter. For example, as a father, Gómez was ahead of his time in his encouraging his daughters to seek higher education and to never be dependent on a man. As will be discussed in chapter four, he was not concerned with women's place in society at that time; instead his focus was on the future for his daughters and their security and happiness. As a businessman he hired a black waitress during World War II without the blink of an eye. His response, to be discussed in the third chapter, to any customer that was unhappy with this was to simply state that this was all he could find during the labor shortages that

accompanied the war. Again his focus was not on the racial tensions of the day, but instead on his business and the ability to provide good service.

Ethnicity and class played an important role in Estella Reyes' life as well. Reyes was also involved in a Mexican club. In fact she was the most active of the Gómez family. As a young woman Reyes co-founded *Club Femenino Chapultepec* a Mexican women's social club. *Club Chapultepec* hosted dinners and dances, citizenship classes, and other social events and was founded under the auspice of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Originally invited to join the YWCA's Business and Professional Club, the members of *Club Chapultepec* chose to form their own distinct club for Mexican women. Reyes and her peers were aware of the need to focus on issues specific to the Mexican community. Their choice to remain a separate club provided a comfortable space with which to do so and reflects the role ethnicity played in Reyes' life. That membership in the club was restricted to those interested in business and professional jobs speaks to the opportunities available to Mexican women of the middle class, specifically the opportunity to attain a certain level of education.

The Gómez family experienced social mobility in a relatively short period of time. Within a decade of their arrival to Houston the Gómez family had achieved middle-class status, a significant feat considering most of the Mexican population consisted of working class laborers. Personal receipts found in the family's archival collection suggest that the family had moved up in society's class structure even before they opened their successful businesses. In the 1920s the family owned a truck, and could afford to purchase luxury items such as a typewriter and a saxophone.[46] Additionally, the Gómez

[46] Personal Receipts, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

family was able to afford the twenty-dollar monthly tuition for Reyes to attend Sam Houston High School, of which she became the first Mexican American female to graduate. Occupying middle class status meant the Gómez family's day-to-day experiences were very different from that of a majority of Houston's Mexican population. They lived in the Sixth Ward instead of the larger and more densely populated Second Ward, north side, and Magnolia Park. The neighborhoods in these areas were mostly substandard, many lacking such amenities as running water and paved roads.[47] These conditions were not unique to Houston, nor to Mexicans in the United States. Across the nation ethnic and racial minorities and the working class in general were subject to substandard living conditions. This is not to say that the Gómez family was far removed from the plight of the working class. The entire Mexican community in Houston, and *colonia*s across the country, were fully aware that despite class differences within their community, to most of the white society Mexicans were all the same. Jim Crow codes written for African Americans also applied to Mexicans; they were denied access to many public and private establishments owned by Anglos.[48] As an adult Reyes would use her membership in *Club Chapultepec* as a platform to speak out against such racist practices.

While Jim Crow daily practices extended to Mexicans, laws were written explicitly within the black-white race framework. Mexicans were "legally" white. Mexicans and Mexican Americans were allowed to ride the public streetcars without

[47] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 26-27.
[48] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 26-27; Steptoe, "Dixie West," 138-139, 155-156; Richard Griswold del Castillo, "The Paradox of War – Mexican American Patriotism, Racism, and Memory," in *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation*, ed. Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez and Emilio Zamora (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 12; George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12.

having to legally give up their seat for a white person, and were not legally segregated from white schools. This of course did not prevent any white persons from practicing discrimination at their own discretion. Just because Mexicans were not formally segregated from certain spaces does not mean they were treated fairly. Tyina Steptoe analyzes this contradictory and fluid state of being.[49] Her detailed comparative study between blacks, Mexicans, and Creoles in Houston reveals a constantly changing color line unique to Houston that was not black and white, and not entirely concrete. In fact as Steptoe states "Distinct racial hierarchies developed in different urban spaces, so Mexican Americans' access to the privileges of whiteness depended upon where they were in the city at any given time."[50]

Through business ownership the Gómez family found space within Houston's established racial hierarchy and Mexican social life. Key to finding this balance and gaining agency was their place of residence and business. While various Mexican settlements in Houston were not isolated from each other, as the Gómez family's participation in activities in the Second Ward can attest, the Sixth Ward was a different space. This location offered a unique social and business context that allowed the Gómez family to achieve success.

Houston's Sixth Ward

The Houston city charter of 1839 divided the city into four wards. The ward system was originally drawn up for ten wards, anticipating the growth of the city. However, only six wards were ever used. Although this system was officially disbanded

[49] Steptoe, "Dixie West."
[50] Ibid, 125.

in 1905, Houstonians continue to the present to use the ward names when referencing various parts of the city.[51] When Melesio Gómez and his family arrived in Houston in 1919 a few wards were developing their own Mexican cultural identities. White Houstonians of upper and middle-class status were moving away from the center of the city towards the suburbs while Mexicans replaced them and joined others already living near downtown because of the railroads.[52]

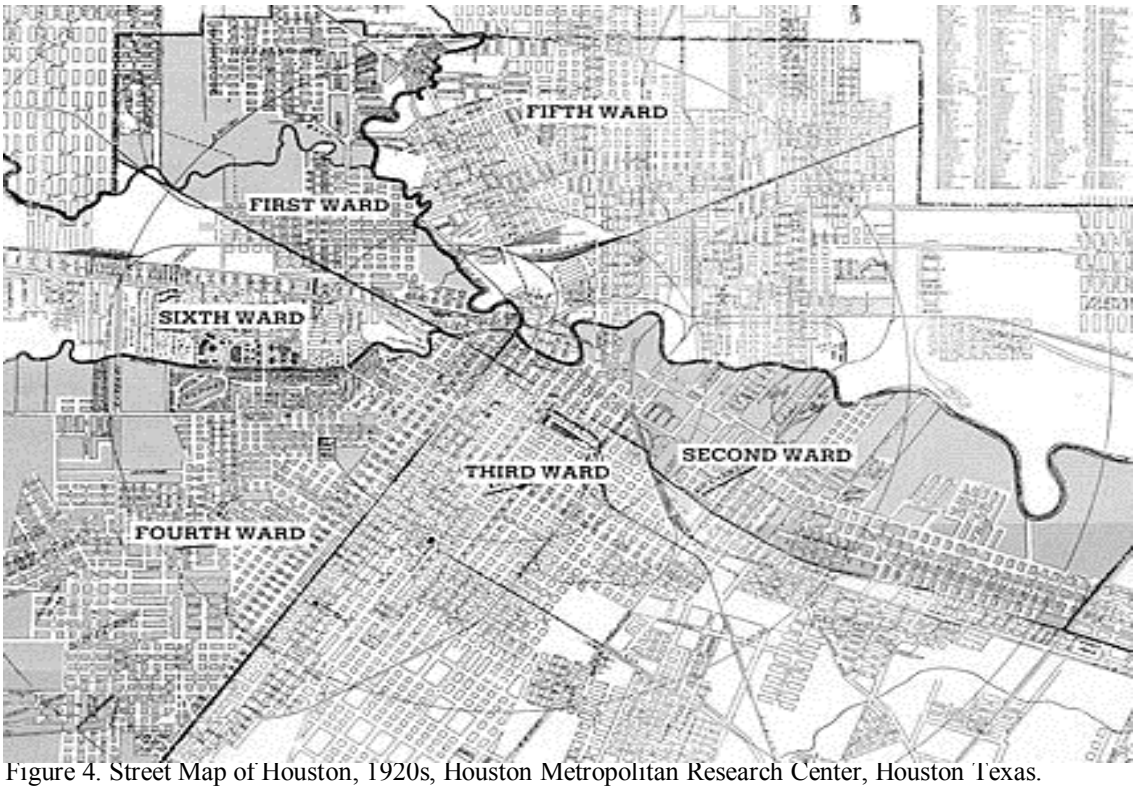

Figure 4. Street Map of Houston, 1920s, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Texas.

In the 1920s the wards with a majority Mexican-born population were Second and Fifth Wards, located east and north of downtown respectively, and numbering just over a

[51] Diana J. Kleiner, "SIXTH WARD, HOUSTON," *Handbook of Texas Online* (http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hpsxc), accessed January 28, 2013; Janet K. Wagner, "Sixth Ward: Carving Out its Own Place," *Houston History Magazine* (http://houstonhistorymagazine.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Sixth-Ward.pdf), accessed January 28, 2013.
[52] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 14.

thousand in each location. Directly next to the Second Ward, further east, was the growing Magnolia Park subdivision, which was not directly under the ward system but had an equally significant Mexican population. There existed smaller pockets of Mexican residents in the Heights area (First Ward) and directly west of downtown in the Sixth Ward. For Gómez, entering Houston at this time was extremely advantageous; a rapidly growing Mexican population throughout the city encouraged Mexican businesses in general. While a Mexican commercial district was developing on the eastern edge of downtown the smaller pockets of Mexican residents appearing in other parts of Houston, the west side in particular, provided opportunity as well.

The Gómez family established themselves in the Sixth Ward. While Gómez may have originally chosen this place of residence because of his employment at the nearby railroad, his choice to stay in this neighborhood as opposed to moving east to Second Ward or Magnolia Park affected the family's cultural experience in Houston as well as their experience as business owners. The Gómez family first settled in a small apartment near Capitol Bridge and after six months they moved to a home nearby on the 200 block of Rusk. Both locations were on the west end of downtown bordering the Sixth Ward. Within a few years the family moved further west, making the Sixth Ward neighborhood their permanent home. While Reyes recalled other Mexicans living in this area, this location had a much smaller percentage of Mexicans compared to other parts of Houston. Sixth Ward sat between downtown (and the larger Mexican *barrios*) and the more affluent far west end of Houston (Montrose and River Oaks subdivisions). Washington Avenue was the main thoroughfare that ran through the area. Most Mexican residents lived on Center Street just north of Washington. Sixth Ward originally occupied the

northern portion of Fourth Ward, known as "Fourth Ward North." As the population increased, Fourth Ward North was separated from its parent ward and in 1876 the Sixth Ward was officially created. In the late 1880s, the area came to be known as "uptown" to distinguish the increasing number of businesses on Washington Avenue from the commercial district in "downtown." Like the Second Ward area, eastern and southern Europeans originally occupied this neighborhood. It did not have a substantial Mexican population until the 1930s.[53]

In 1920 the City Directory listed roughly fifty persons with Spanish-surnames out of the total population residing in the Sixth Ward. Counting Spanish surnames is problematic for the obvious reason that not all Mexicans have Spanish-language names. Using the City Directory in this instance, however, provides a general estimate of the rapid growth of this population in the Sixth Ward. By 1932 when St. Stephen's Church, catering to the Mexican population, was established on Center Street, the Spanish-surnamed population had doubled to about ten percent of the Sixth Ward. This steady rise in numbers continued through the decade. By the 1940s the Mexican population would constitute nearly twenty percent of the total population of the Sixth Ward.[54]

The Sixth Ward was an ethnically mixed neighborhood with a small Mexican population. That it was home to ethnic white immigrants including Lebanese, Italian, German, Jewish, and Greek Houstonians as opposed to Anglo Texans is significant. Whereas Anglo Texans still remembered and spoke of the War of 1836 in which Texas

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[53] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979; De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 24; Diana J. Kleiner, "SIXTH WARD, HOUSTON," *Handbook of Texas Online* (http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hpsxc), accessed January 28, 2013.

[54] *Directory of the City of Houston*, 1920-1940. These estimates are based on my count of the Spanish surnamed persons listed on the following major streets in Sixth Ward: Washington Avenue, Center Street, Decatur Street, Kane Street, Union Street, and State Street, Artesian Place, Ash. Place, Bismark , Colorado Dewey , Goliad , Hemphill , Henderson, Hickory , Johnson, Morin Pl , Taylor , Trinity , Sabine , Silver , White; on St. Stephen's Catholic Church, see Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio*, 111.

won its independence from Mexico, most ethnic white immigrants did not have the same attachment to the legacy of this war and tended to be less discriminatory towards ethnic Mexicans.[55] One former Mexican resident of the Sixth Ward, a World War II veteran named Ernest Eguia, explained that the Jewish population resided on the east side of the ward, while the Italians lived in the north and the Polish and German residents were mostly on the south side of the neighborhood. Mexican Americans for the most part lived near the Italians to the north. "'[That was] our little community there in the Sixth Ward. We could go into different parts of town and it's a different thing, but where we lived that's the way it was. We all lived together and we went to school together…"[56] Eguia's comment regarding the other parts of town being "different" is a reference to the unique diversity of the Sixth Ward.

The family's settlement in the Sixth Ward determined the development of their tortilla factory, café, and products shop and ultimately defined their experience in Houston. In addition to the opportunity to serve a growing Mexican population, the family's location also provided access to the non-Mexican community nearby. Not only was the Sixth Ward a multi-ethnic neighborhood, but it sat between Houston's upper middle-class Anglo population living in the far west end of Houston and downtown. Placing his businesses on Washington Avenue, a major thoroughfare that ran directly through the neighborhood to downtown, Gómez gained exposure for his businesses to a population of Houston that most likely would never have known he existed had he established himself in the larger Mexican *barrios.*

[55] Steptoe, "Dixie West," 131.
[56] Ernest Eguia, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, February 25, 1988.

Overall Houston was a city of opportunity. Not only was the Bayou City flourishing economically, but when the Gómez family arrived in 1920, the Mexican population was establishing itself as a more visible and thriving community. By the 1930s, when over sixty percent of the Mexican community worked as laborers, the Gómez family had achieved middle class status and established three businesses. Their settlement in the multi-ethnic Sixth Ward determined the development of their businesses. At a time when Mexican business owners catered mostly to Mexican customers, the family's first successful business venture La Nacional Tortilla Factory was able to reach non-Mexican consumers almost immediately upon opening.

Chapter 2: La Nacional Tortilla Factory

Melesio Gómez never sold a crooked tortilla. His daughter Estella Reyes explained "He would take it off the line and put it in the waste barrel that we would keep for some ranchers … to be used as food for pigs. He said 'Oh no. They have to be pretty besides being good.'" [1] La Nacional Tortilla Factory sold pretty tortillas for over three decades. Gómez was not the first tortilla manufacturer to test the Houston market. However, he was the first to succeed, as the previous company was open for just two years.[2] Despite opening in 1929 on the cusp of the nation's worst economic crisis, the continued growth of the Mexican population in the Sixth Ward and the advertisement of Mexican food to Houston's Anglo women created a market for La Nacional. The factory's location on Washington Avenue, outside of the larger Mexican *barrios*, placed Gómez in a position to reach non-Mexican consumers. The factory's relationship with white grocers and restaurant owners was strengthened by Gómez's decision to educate the non-Mexican community on how to use his products. This was especially important

[1] Estella Reyes, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, June 22, 1979.
[2] Ibid. According to one oral history interview with Reyes, her father knew a fellow entrepreneur whose recent tortilla factory venture in Houston did not survive the Depression. This man traveled to Houston to start his tortilla business sometime during the 1920s and was not able to sell enough tortillas to stay afloat. He sold his machinery to Gómez and moved to San Antonio. Only one tortilla factory is listed in the Houston City Directory as being established before La Nacional: Superior Tortilla Factory owned by Manuel Vidal. It is unclear whether Vidal is the man to whom Reyes referred. Superior Tortilla is listed between 1928 and 1930 and was located in downtown Houston at 219 Preston, on the western edge not far from where Gómez would open his own factory. Vidal's wife Concepcion Vidal is listed as the manager, and a relative, José Vidal, is listed as an employee. In the September 15, 1928 issue of *La Gaceta Mexicana*, a Spanish language newspaper dedicated to the promotion of Mexican business, there is an advertisement for the Vidal family business; however, the name of the business printed here is "*La Vencedora.*" There is no mention of *La Vencedora* in the Houston City Directory, only Superior Tortilla Factory. The use of the Spanish language in the title of his business in this instance perhaps reflects the Vidal family's attempt to specifically reach the Spanish-speaking population. The Vidal family business was located in downtown Houston, their home was in the Heights area at 934 Fugate. Like the Gómez family they were living in a smaller Mexican *barrio* than those on Houston's east side. I have found no other evidence about the Vidal family and their tortilla factory. While this factory's short life in Houston is most likely due to the economic Depression further information is needed. Directory of the City of Houston, 1927, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas; *"La Vencedora," La Gaceta Mexicana,* September 15, 1928.

during the late 1930s when competition for Mexican patrons arose. This chapter will discuss the business and social climate of the 1920s and 1930s that affected the opening of La Nacional and argues that Gómez's middle-class status, unique location, and approach to business played key roles in his success.

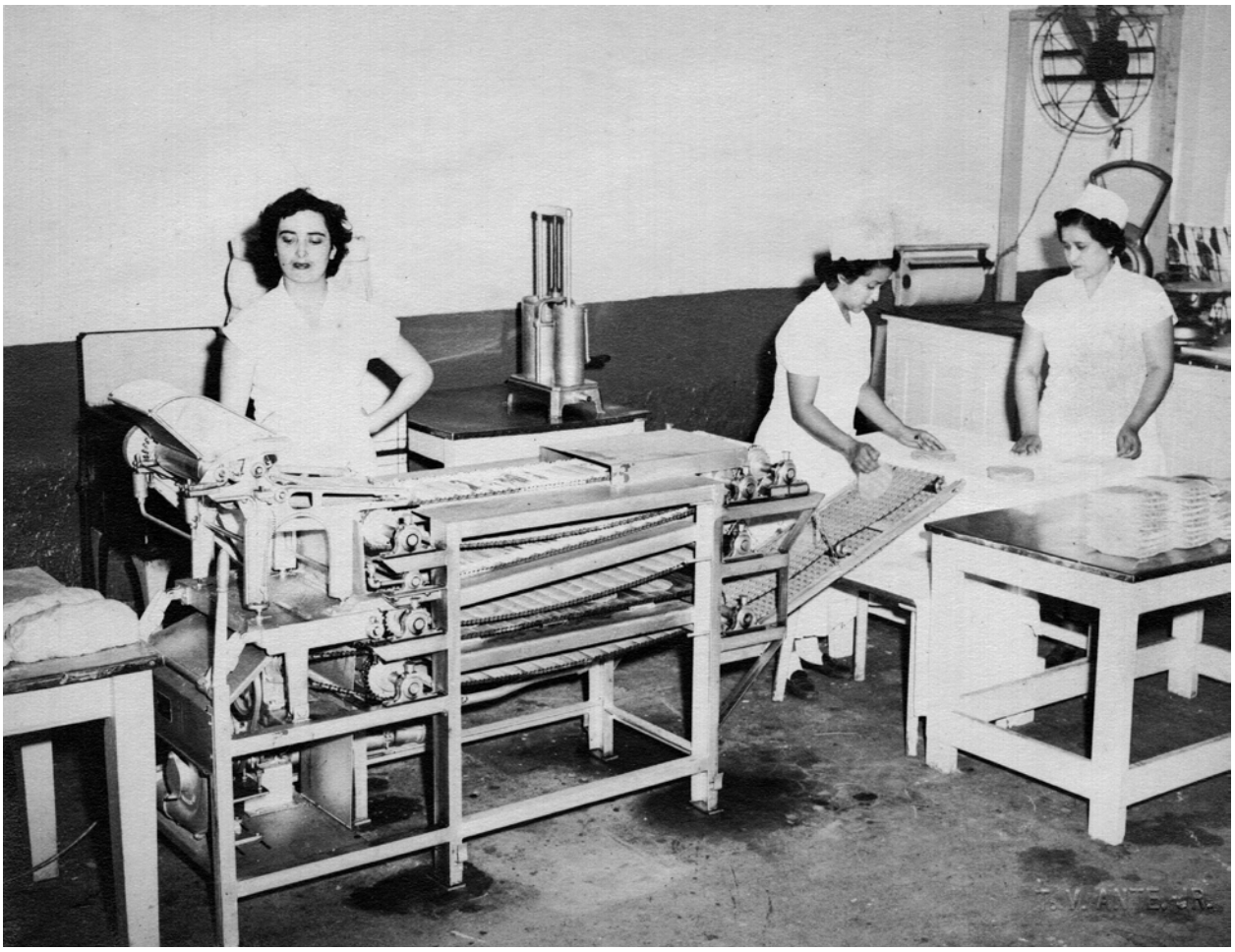

Figure 5. La Nacional Tortilla Factory. From right to left: Estella Gómez, Rita Coronado, and Lupe Guerra, Houston, Texas, 1950s, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-42, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

Opportunity in Tortillas

Deciding to start a business in 1929 in the United States was risky. This was the year the U.S. stock market crashed and the beginning of a decade-long economic depression. The financial impact on Houston worsened already poor conditions for the

city's Mexican population. By 1931 hundreds were unemployed and city authorities refused to provide work relief. Applications for unemployment aid were not accepted and legislation restricted non-citizens from working on local Works Progress Administration (WPA) jobs. As late as 1937, some 2,700 Mexicans were removed from the agency's rolls. They were left to rely on churches, their own mutual aid societies, and settlement associations.[3] For many in the *colonia* the harsh social and racial conditions created by the Depression were far worse than the unstable economic market. Americans seeking a convenient scapegoat for the economic woes of the Depression chose to blame Mexicans. Anti-Mexican hysteria escalated and a national effort to rid the country of Mexicans (regardless of their place of birth) led to mass deportations. The repatriation efforts told Mexicans they were not people but rather an economic liability, something to be disposed of at a moment's notice. Raids of construction job sites in Houston were frequent. In 1931 there were 152 deportations from the city.[4]

Many Mexicans across the country also returned to Mexico voluntarily. Whether persuaded by the atmosphere of racial tension, lack of economic security or the promise of better conditions in their home country by the Mexican government, Mexicans were compelled to evaluate their status in the United States and make a choice.[5] Generally, the first repatriates to return to Mexico of their own will were not destitute but were middle class Mexicans.[6] In Houston various Mexican and Mexican American social

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[3] Arnoldo De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 45-50.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 73.
[6] Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression; Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tuscon: University of Arizona, 1974), 2, 25, 35-36. The Mexican government at this time created policies to persuade Mexicans to return to Mexico. Policies included allowing repatriates to bring material possessions across the border with them free of duty and free transportation into Mexico. For more

organizations combined efforts to form a *Comité Pro-Repatriación* (Pro-Repatriation Committee) in conjunction with the Mexican Consul, encouraging families to look for a better life in Mexico. In 1930 over three hundred Mexican families registered through the Mexican consul and repatriated from Houston.[7]

Gómez witnessed the effects of the Depression first-hand, having closed his first business endeavor in Houston, a grocery store, in 1928 just a year before the stock market crashed. On the eve of the Great Depression the general public's purchasing power was dwindling. Like retail business owners across the nation, Gómez attempted to ride out the depression by selling food on credit. After only three years of business, he was forced to shut down the store.[8] Despite this setback the Gómez family, along with many Mexicans in Houston, decided to stay in the United States and had no intention of returning to Mexico. For the Gómez family, their experience in Houston had been a very positive one and there was no reason to leave. At the start of the Depression, the family had been in Houston for almost a decade. Within that time, Gómez was able to start a business in 1925; he earned enough income to purchase a vehicle in 1928; and his middle daughter was the first Mexican American to graduate from Sam Houston High School in 1929. One year later, Gómez would send his daughter to Massey Business College. Having extra income in the 1920s to spend on a vehicle and to pay for college tuition was not

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on the role of the Mexican government during Depression Era repatriation efforts see Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans,* 133-151; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects,* 73.

[7] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 45-48. De Leon states that these numbers may only reflect those that chose to register with the Mexican consulate before leaving Houston. He adds that the American consul at Nuevo Laredo counted 895 former Houston residents in Laredo in the last half of 1930. De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 47.

[8] La Nacional Tortilla Factory, Newspaper Clippings, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, TX.

common among Mexicans in the United States. Gómez had been able to move up the socioeconomic ladder to achieve middle class status in a relatively short amount of time.[9]

Gómez was part of the Mexican middle class that continued to take shape in the *colonia* during this decade.[10] Moreover, he was a member of *Los Leñadores del Mundo,* a branch of the Woodmen of the World (WOW) and one of the few fraternal insurance societies that did not feel the impact of the Depression. WOW was a Masonic mutual aid society whose members were generally middle-class and were thus able to pay dues and survive the Depression. While the working-class members of organizations like *Club Cultural Recreativo Mexico Bello* or *Sociedad Mutualista Mexicana Benito Juárez* struggled to make monetary contributions during this time, WOW faced little hardship and was able to provide financial support to its members.[11] Thus, in 1929, Gómez was able to begin a completely new business venture.

He was not alone in this experience. In fact despite the dismal economic climate, Houston was not as hard hit by the era as other cities. The Port of Houston was a few years away from becoming the nation's sixth largest port, making Houston a vital center for shipment. This combined with the continued discoveries of oil fields in East Texas

[9] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 52; Personal Receipts. Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Houston, TX.

[10] The many industrial and manufacturing sectors of Houston that survived the Depression were also the largest employers of Mexican labor. A significant number of Mexican business owners survived and were able to start new businesses because they relied so heavily on this steady stream of Mexican working-class consumers. In fact by 1940 a Mexican Chamber of Commerce was established in Houston. De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt,* 54-55.

[11] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 68; Jose Amaro Hernández, *Mutual Aid for Survival: The Case of the Mexican American* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 1983), 65-66.

garnered Houston significant amounts of federal funding and enabled the city to weather the worst of the Depression.[12]

While his grocery store was unable to survive, Gómez saw opportunity in tortillas. While he would also sell ingredients for making tamales such as masa, corn husks, and chili peppers, his focus was freshly-made tortillas. His decision to stop selling general groceries and sell only a few food products central to Mexican cooking proved to be advantageous. La Nacional Tortilla Factory enjoyed roughly forty years of business in Houston from 1929 to 1968.

The Factory's Mexican Customers

The factory's success was due in part to the existing need for Gómez's product by the Mexican population in Houston. In 1930 Houston's Mexican population was roughly 15,000. A significant but small group of Mexican entrepreneurs catered to the community of largely working class laborers.[13] This left ample room for Mexican entrepreneurs like Gómez to serve this market in any capacity without much competition. In choosing to open a tortilla factory, he was addressing a specific need in the community for Mexican food products. Particular herbs, spices, and *nixtamal* (a special treated corn used to make masa for tortillas and tamales) were not easily found in United States retail stores at this time. Tortillas in particular, were a necessary but time-consuming chore as they were (and continue to be) a major staple of the Mexican diet and are not easy to make. Mexican immigrants relied on the few Mexican products stores, street vendors, and

[12] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 45. For a description of how Houston and other Southern cities were affected by the Depression see Roger Biles, "The Urban South in the Great Depression," *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. 56, No. 1 (February 1990), 71-100.
[13] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 52.

Mexican–owned grocery stores to stock these goods. In 1930 there were only about fifty to sixty small Mexican-owned grocery stores to serve the thriving population, the majority of which were located east and north of downtown. [14]

According to food historian Jeffrey Pilcher, many Mexican women were making tortillas at home at the time La Nacional opened.[15] The average time it took a woman to make tortillas by hand (from scratch, without purchasing pre-made *nixtamal*) for a family was five to six hours. Mexican women woke up before dawn to begin the process of simmering the corn in a mineral lime solution to make *nixtamal*. This was then ground on a *metate* to create dough called *masa*, which was then patted continuously until the flat round tortilla shape was formed. Finally, the tortilla was cooked on a *comal*. A few seconds too long and the tortilla would burn, take it off of the comal too soon and the tortilla would stick and possibly break upon removal. Tortillas were only good enough to eat for one day, making this intricate process a daily chore.[16] For many Mexican women in Houston, making tortillas was hardly an option. In the 1930s Mexican women in Houston were highly visible in the workforce.[17] Wages were too low at this time for one person to support an entire family so many Mexican women worked outside the home. The most common employment for Mexican women in Houston was in the textile or other industrial factories, or as laundresses and laborers.[18] Contributing to the family income did not relieve women of the female household duties such as cooking family

[14] Directory of the City of Houston, 1930, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[15] Jeffrey Pilcher, *!Que Vivan Los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).
[16] *Ibid*, 110-111.
[17] Francisco A. Rosales and Barry J. Kapner, ed. *Houston, A Twentieth Century Urban Frontier* (Port Washington: Associate Faculty Press, 1983), 70; De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 53.
[18] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 52-53.

meals however. Thus there existed potential for a tortilla factory among Houston's Mexican population.

Figure 6. Washington Avenue scene in front of La Nacional Tortilla Factory, Houston, Texas, 1944, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-46, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

Gómez was not the only entrepreneur in Houston to see opportunity in the Mexican food manufacturing industry. Between 1928 and 1932 there were five tortilla

factories and four tamale manufacturers.[19] La Nacional, however, was the only one to last for so many years. The other establishments closed within two years of opening. One of these short-lived companies was owned by Guerra Macedonia. The City Directory lists his place of business at 5429 Washington Avenue. This was outside of the Sixth Ward in what was, at that time, Houston's far west end (just north of the all-white exclusive River Oaks subdivision). While his tamale and tortilla company was not successful, it shows that other Mexican business owners were aware of the potential market for these products outside of the *barrios*. The lack of competition during the first few years of opening the factory enabled Gómez to establish business with two Mexican-owned grocery stores as far east as Magnolia Park: one was Julian's Grocery Store on 76th Street. [20] Magnolia Park located on the far east side of downtown was previously an all-white neighborhood and soon became home to one of the largest Mexican populations in Houston. The need for labor to enlarge the Houston Ship Channel brought a large number of Mexican families to the area. By the late 1920s a school and a church were established to serve the growing number of Spanish-speaking residents.[21] During the late 1930s more competitors arose in the tortilla and tamale industry and established themselves in the large Mexican *barrios*, with the exception of one located in the Heights.[22] A tortilla factory was opened by Genaro Flores at 2213 Runnels Street near Our Lady of Guadalupe Church; and tamale manufacturing companies were established by Bonifacio Martínez at 1209 ½ Rothwell Street just north of downtown and M.E. Berryhill at 1116 West 16th Street in

[19] Directory of the City of Houston, 1920-1940, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[20] Directory of the City of Houston, 1920-1940, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas; Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[21] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 14-16, 28, 57; Robert Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 109.
[22] The Houston City Directory listed tortilla factories until 1930 when the listing changed to include tamale manufacturing companies. By 1935 they were separated into two categories.

the Heights. Flores, and Martínez who sold tamales, were most likely taking advantage of the rise of business districts in the individual neighborhoods that were forming in order to serve the expanding Mexican population outside of the center of Houston. For example, by the late 1930s, Magnolia Park residents could purchase everything they needed without leaving the neighborhood. That M.E. Berryhill was a white Houstonian making and selling tamales in the Heights reflects an emerging interest in Mexican food by non-Mexicans.[23] Berryhill was not alone in his venture. As will be discussed later in this chapter, white entrepreneurs all over Texas were finding success in the Mexican food industry.

The Factory's Success with Anglo Houstonians

The success of La Nacional was also, in large part, due to the demand for tortillas by the large chain grocery stores in Houston. La Nacional Tortilla Factory's first call from an Anglo-owned grocery store came from the Henke & Pillot (H&P) No. 1 on Milam Street in downtown Houston.[24] Based on information from the oral history interviews with Estella Reyes, this business relationship may have begun as early as 1930, although the exact date is unknown. By 1936 La Nacional supplied tortillas to Weingarten's, a major supermarket chain throughout the Southern United States. Its headquarters, like H&P, was located in Houston. According to Reyes "People from all over the city were looking for tortillas."[25]

[23] It is uncertain whether this Berryhill Tamale Company is the same establishment that exists today in Houston. According to the current Berryhill website, the company was started by Walter Berryhill in 1928. He sold homemade tamales from a pushcart in the exclusive River Oaks subdivision. Further research necessary. See http://www.berryhillbajagrill.com/our-story/
[24] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[25] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.

Major grocery stores were interested in buying tortillas because of the popularity of Mexican food among the non-Mexican community. This interest in Mexican food actually began in the late 1800s along the United States-Mexico border when two Mexican dishes became widely accepted and popular among white Americans. These were *chili con carne* and tamales. By the 1890s, chili stands and tamale vendors were a common sight in a number of the United States' larger cities. In fact one of the main attractions at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago were the Texas chili stands, run by Mexican women known as San Antonio's "Chili Queens."[26] By the 1920s and 1930s newspaper advertisements and articles published in major cities across the country frequently promoted Mexican food products and recipes. American cookbooks and ladies' home journals in the 1890s contained numerous dishes using tortillas and grocery stores across the country offered canned tamales and canned chili (for the infamous chili con carne concoction).[27] According to author Gustavo Arrellano, One reason Mexican food was very popular nationally at this time was due to the promotion of Mexico as having a romantic and mysterious history. Throughout the Southwestern states, including Texas, reference to the historical link to Spain and Mexico was frequently used to sell everything from food products to sombreros to real-estate.

The interest in Mexican food was made ever more palatable by the large number of companies that offered ready-made Mexican food products. Mexican food was seen as difficult to prepare. One article published in the *Los Angeles Times* summarized Mexican

[26] In Texas the interest in Mexican food among white Americans led to the creation of recipes that satisfied the American palate and the result was a unique regional cuisine called Tex-Mex. For the history of Tex-Mex cuisine see Jeffrey Pilcher,!*Que Vivan Los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Robb Walsh, *The Tex-Mex Cookbook: A History in Recipes and Photos* (Austin: Ten Speed Press, 2004); Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont, *Eating in America: A History* (New York: Morrow, 1976).

[27] Gustavo Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 29-49.

food as economical and appetizing, however "The main drawback for most of us busy housewives is the fact that many Mexican dishes are long and involved in preparation. The answer to this problem is the same that it is with our own American recipes. Use the ready-prepared tortillas, chili sauces, etc. With their aid any of the typically Mexican menus given here may be easily and quickly prepared in your home."[28] Several white Texans filled the national obsession by commercializing Mexican food for the American palate in the early 1900s. William Gerard Tobin opened the first factory in the United States devoted to canning chili con carne in 1884 in San Antonio. This was soon followed by D.C. Pendry's chili powder in Fort Worth in the 1890s and T.B. Walker's chili powder, canned chili con carne, and canned tamales in Austin, Texas in 1901. Perhaps the most famous of them all was William Gebhardt. Gebhardt, a German immigrant living in New Braunfels, sold chili powder, canned chili con carne, tamales, and beans. In 1911 he also published *Mexican Cooking*, a cookbook with recipes using his products. An updated version in 1923 sold internationally. That same year Gebhardt launched the "Mexican Dinner Package" which consisted of chili powder, chili meat, canned chili con carne, tamales, and beans. These packages were sold all over the United States, and Gebhardt's company dominated the Mexican food products industry for decades.[29]

White women in Houston were equally subject to the Mexican food trend happening nationally. In the early 1900s white Houston housewives were frequently exposed to Mexican food recipes and expected ready-made Mexican products to help them make these meals. Following the national trend, grocery stores in Houston like Weingarten's, Henke & Pillot, and A&P frequently advertised "Mexican" products such

[28] "Piquancy Lure of Mexican Food," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1939.
[29] Arellano, *Taco USA*, 178-180.

as canned chili, canned tamales and chili powder.[30] In 1928 Ms. Houston's Model Kitchen, a section in the *Houston Post* aimed at Houston's white women, listed Walker's Mexican Chili Powder as one of their most recommended products.[31] Later that year Ms. Houston's announced when the product received the Good Housekeeping Seal.[32]

The Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval was a reflection of the new field of domestic science and the authority that home economists had over all matters of the home, especially the kitchen.[33] One such expert was Rada Sue Garrett. Garrett, home economist and lecturer, traveled throughout the United States, especially throughout Texas, offering her "Happy Kitchen" cooking workshops for women. Starting in 1931, two years after the opening of La Nacional, Garrett made appearances in Houston to host the *Houston Post*'s Annual Cooking School event. Mexican food was frequently highlighted at these events. In 1932 Garrett dedicated an entire workshop to creating a menu for a Mexican dinner.[34] Referring to Gebhardt's *Mexican Cooking* cookbook, given away for free at the cooking event, Garrett stated that "No woman should be without a copy." In addition to learning how to create a Mexican dinner menu, Garrett offered Houston housewives a workshop on "How to Plan and Prepare a Mexican Party."[35] Evidence in the "Society" page of the *Houston Post* dated January 2, 1938, where Houstonians were informed of the activities of local socialites, reveals that Houston elites

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[30] Based on a survey of advertisements in the *Houston Post*, 1928-1929.
[31] "Mrs. Houston's Model Kitchen," *Houston Post*, November 15, 1928.
[32] "Walker's Receives Good House Keeping Seal," *Houston Post* (Houston, TX), November 17, 1928. The Good Housekeeping Seal was created in 1909 by *Good Housekeeping* magazine and was originally intended to serve as a stamp of approval of a good product. The magazine established the Good Housekeeping Experiment Station to test products and their seal of approval quickly became American women's most treasured guide in consumer buying. The magazine was the largest circulation women's magazine of the 1920s. Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 159.
[33] Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty,*92.
[34] "Mexican Fare," *Houston Post,* March 7, 1952.
[35] Advertisement, "How to Plan and Prepare a Mexican Party," *Houston Post,* March 7, 1952.

put this into practice. The Lee family is said to have honored a guest in their home with a cocktail party complete with "a captivating environment worked out in Mexican ideas. High colored blankets, serapes, and oil paintings depicting scenes in Mexico, were hung on the walls, and in clever placing were wide-brimmed decorated hats, chains of gourds and bright hued peppers."[36] Lasting for three to four days this free event drew hundreds of Houston women each year. Those who did not attend could listen to Garrett's lectures over Houston's KTLC radio station or find all recipes published in the *Houston Post*.[37]

While Anglo Houston women in 1930s were pointing to their Mexican neighbors as economic liabilities, they were simultaneously reading about Mexican food in the newspaper, hearing about it on the radio, and finding Mexican food products on their grocery store shelves. Gómez had access to this market as a result of a combination of factors including the state of the tortilla manufacturing industry at this time, his factory's location in the Sixth Ward, and a keen business approach.

Conquering the Tortilla

White American entrepreneurs like Gephardt and Walker had taken over the Mexican food products industry but they had yet to conquer the "authentic" tortilla. The canned tortillas most manufacturers were attempting to sell since the early 1900s did not resemble or taste like a homemade tortilla, although white consumers continued to purchase them. The tortilla manufacturing industry had only recently been established in Mexico and was still in its infancy. While corn mills had made their way into production in the 1860s, inventors and entrepreneurs throughout Mexico (and a few in the United

[36] "Society," *Houston Post,* January 2, 1938.
[37] "Throngs Expected to Attend Lecture of Rada Sue Garrett," *Houston Post* March 7, 1952.

States) struggled to mechanize the entire tortilla making process. This feat proved difficult due to the delicate nature of the tortilla itself and the high expectations for quality and taste. It was not until the 1920s, that tortilla machine models actually made it to market and many of these initial machines were difficult and inefficient to use.[38] In fact for the first few years of business, Gómez sold hand-made tortillas as the first machine he attempted to use was "too complicated." Thus, in a Mexican food scene dominated by Anglos, Gómez had a product that tasted good and it was very much in demand.

In the late 1930s La Nacional also began supplying tortillas to major retail stores W.T Grant and S. H. Kress. Located in downtown Houston, Grant's and Kress differed from Weingarten's, Henke & Pillot, and A&P in that they also served food at their lunch counters. These establishments wanted to sell enchiladas and the Gómez family made this happen. Not only did La Nacional provide tortillas, but Gómez and his daughter Estella Reyes personally visited the stores to teach their chefs how to use the tortilla to make enchiladas.[39] According to Reyes:

> They [W. T. Grant's] became one of the stores downtown selling more enchiladas than any place downtown. ….We had to teach them. We had to go and tell them how to do it. They had chefs but they didn't know how. They tried every way to do it but they really didn't know how. …I was one of those persons that went with my father to show them how to make those enchiladas. So they increased their sales more. …That was the biggest supplier of tortillas for about thirty-five years up to 1968. …S.H Kress downtown included the Mexican food and we did the same thing; went to the chef in the kitchen and showed them how to make the enchiladas. They also became big sellers of that food: certain Mexican food. They made them how it's supposed to be and people liked them. So they became one of our biggest purchasers of tortillas.[40]

[38] Pilcher, ¡*Que Vivan Los Tamales!*, 106.
[39] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[40] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.

Considering the hostile environment of the 1930s for the Mexican and Mexican American population, establishing a positive business relationship through food was a significant feat. Gómez successfully employed an educational approach to his business strategy. Gómez and his daughter entering the kitchen at W.T. Grant's and S.H. Kress to reveal the art of the enchilada made food a common factor, something enjoyed by both communities.

Location in the Sixth Ward

Gómez made another strategic business decision when he decided to establish his factory on Washington Avenue, the main thoroughfare through the Sixth Ward. The factory's location placed it in full view of Anglos living in the Sixth Ward and those living farther west (River Oaks and West University) as they made their way to and from downtown. La Nacional's first Sixth Ward purchaser was the Pig Stand No.7 at 2412 Washington Avenue at Sawyer Street. Reyes recalled that the Pig Stand No.7 wanted to add enchiladas to their menu alongside their hamburgers and sandwiches. The Pig Stand, a food chain begun in Dallas in 1921, offered the world's first curb service. Waiters greeted customers and took their orders, bringing food directly to the patron's vehicles. "America's Motor Lunch" was their slogan.[41] The chain peaked in the 1930s with about 130 Pig Stands, mostly in Texas and California. The Pig Stand took credit for such wholly American food items as deep-fried onion rings and chicken-fried steak sandwiches, and was among the first restaurants to use florescent lighting and neon

[41] John MacCormack, "Last Pig Standing," *Texas Observer*, May 2, 2008, http://www.texasobserver.org/2751-last-pig-standing-in-san-antonio-texas-founding-contribution-to-fast-food-culture-hangs-on-by-the-hair-of-its-chinny-chin-chin/ [accessed February 20, 2013].

signs.[42] That the Pig Stand No. 7 never offered Mexican food before establishing a relationship with the Gómez family suggests the influence La Nacional's presence nearby had on the restaurant's business strategy.

By the 1950s, after two decades in business, Houstonians could purchase La Nacional tortillas from two major grocery chains, and they could find them in their enchiladas while dining at the W. T Grant's, S. H. Kress or the popular Pig Stand No.7. La Nacional's strategic business approach and high visibility location made it a well-known presence in Houston. In the mid-1950s the reputation of the factory among Houston's non-Mexican community led to requests for tours of La Nacional from Boy and Girl Scout troops.[43] Gómez took advantage of this opportunity by continuing his strategy of educating the public about Mexican food. Reyes recalled:

> So we would plan for the children to come in… Now we had a big counter from one end of the building to the other. [We'd] clear up the counter and put little dishes showing how to cook the corn: corn when it is raw, when it is cooked, and then how it looks when it's ground… how the tortilla comes out; all those little steps. We were ready to show the children and he [Melesio Gómez] was ready to make the tortillas. So they would come in. Trays of little enchiladas. A tray of little tacos. We made them this little so they don't have to be having a hard time with the big enchiladas. Make everything small, like little samples. …so the children would come in …and we start making tortillas. Show them how they were cooked. Before that we had all gone through telling them what kind of corn, when you cook the corn, here is the sample, here's how you make it, here's how it comes out, here's when it is ready to put through the machine. …When it comes out we have maybe one of the children hold one. 'See that's the tortilla already finished. Now we're going to let you sample some of the dishes that you can make with tortilla. See how you like them'. …and we pass it around and explain it to them. This is an enchilada, this is a taco, this is a tamale. …Now to help you eat your food we're going to give you Coca Cola. The Coca Cola didn't have nothing to do but my father paid for it. Everybody likes Coca Cola. …We had great acceptance from those people.[44]

[42] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.

By opening the door to his factory and creating smaller versions of his products specifically for the kids, Gómez was marketing to an entirely new generation of loyal Houston customers. Reyes recalled that the factory continued to book tours for the next decade until they eventually closed in 1968 due to illness and death in the family. By the time La Nacional shut its doors Mexican food had become less of a trend and more of a familiar and expected part of Houston's culture.

As one of the first Mexican-owned businesses to open in the Sixth Ward, La Nacional Tortilla factory stood on Washington Avenue as a visual marker of the growing Mexican presence on the west side of downtown. Ironically, little else is known about the factory's relationship with the Sixth Ward Mexican community or the Mexican population of Houston in general. Reyes' memories focus almost solely on the business interactions between the factory and white patrons. La Nacional's Sixth Ward location and local food trend that demanded Mexican food allowed business relationships to develop outside the *colonia*. Reyes expresses both her surprise that non-Mexicans would be interested in purchasing tortillas and pride that these interactions garnered "much acceptance from those people."[45] Reyes felt that by doing business with "those people" her family was helping to counter the existing prejudice based on ethnicity. The story of La Nacional Tortilla Factory exemplifies the power of food to cross cultures and generations. Throughout La Nacional Tortilla Factory's thirty-year history perceptions of Mexican food by non-Mexicans changed drastically, allowing La Nacional space in the American grocery store and in the diet of white Houstonians.

[45] Ibid.

Chapter 3: La Consentida Café

Just a few years after opening their tortilla factory, the Gómez family established a Mexican restaurant next door, La Consentida Café. The decision to start another business entirely was not uncommon among Mexican entrepreneurs in Houston at this time. The Sarabia brothers' shop was part grocery store, part curio shop, and part newspaper business.[1] Felix Tijerina owned restaurants, established schools, and supported his wife's curio shop.[2] Ernesto Rodríguez, another prominent Houston entrepreneur, opened a grocery store as well as a print shop.[3] The ability to open multiple types of businesses and stay successful in the 1920s and 1930s reflects how little competition there was for a rapidly growing community that needed so much. When La Consentida Café opened in 1932, there were about two dozen Mexican-owned cafés in Houston.[4] None of these was located on Washington Avenue in Houston's Sixth Ward, which presented Melesio Gómez with a unique opportunity to serve the small pocket of Mexican residents living on this side of Houston. As revealed in the previous chapter, Mexican food also was in demand by the non-Mexican community during the first decades of the twentieth century. Unlike the tortilla factory, however, Gómez's café would not see Anglo customers until World War II. This was due to the popularity of the Anglo-owned Mexican food restaurants in Houston during the 1920s and 1930s and a wariness of Mexican-owned restaurants by white society in general. The war years brought about the transition of La Consentida Café's customer base from largely Mexican

[1] Arnoldo De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 35.
[2] Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001).
[3] Flyers for La Casa Verde grocery store, Ernesto Rodríguez Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Houston, Texas; A.D. Salazar, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, November 8, 1981.
[4] Directory of the City of Houston, 1932-33, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

in the 1930s and early 1940s to largely Anglo during and after WWII. The most striking evidence of this change is the addition of an American food section to the café's menu in 1949. This chapter argues that during the war years an influx of war department employees in downtown Houston, the change in demographics of the Mexican population in the city from largely immigrant to largely American-born, and the entrance of Felix Tijerina into Houston's food scene caused the café's drastic change in clientele.

A Mexican Restaurant with Comfort and Space

During its first decade of business between 1932 and 1941, La Consentida Café served a Mexican clientele that included Mexicans from all over Houston. Reyes recalls that going out to eat at a restaurant was not common place in the 1930s, especially for Mexican families. According to Reyes many of the restaurants and cafés that existed before La Consentida targeted single men who did not have immediate family to provide a home-cooked meal. Gómez wanted his café to be more than just a place to get Mexican food. He wanted to create a place where Mexican families would be comfortable and entertained.[5] At a time when Mexicans were barred from many city parks, restaurants, and consistently treated as second-class citizens, creating comfortable spaces in Houston in the 1930s was crucial to the overall well-being of Houston's Mexican community.[6] Reyes recalled a line of people waiting to get in on the first day of the restaurant's opening; their place was too small to handle the initial wave of customers and many

[5] Estella Reyes, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, June 22, 1979.
[6] Tyina Steptoe, "Dixie West: Race Migration, and the Color Lines in Jim Crow Houston" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008). Throughout her dissertation Steptoe examines the significance of space within the Mexican American population in Houston. For a few specific references, see Steptoe, 2-3, 10.

people ate their meal standing. The café attracted a large number of customers because of the entertainment and long service hours. Customers of La Consentida enjoyed music from a Mexican orchestra a few days out of the week, including *Los Rancheros*, a popular local band from Magnolia Park. The café also served food twenty-four hours a day, an uncommon practice for restaurants at this time.[7] Dinner at La Consentida was frequently an elaborate affair. Flyers from the cafe printed in 1935 invited Mexicans from across Houston and Magnolia Park to bring in the summer season with a program that included several live bands and orchestras in one night, a special hour where all alcoholic beverages were served free of charge, and a special time dedicated to taking a photograph of the interior and all those present.[8]

[7] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[8] La Consentida Café Flyer, 1935, Oversized Material, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

Figure 7. La Consentida Café Flyer, 1935, Oversized Material, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

La Consentida Café also served the general Mexican population as a community gathering place during the 1930s, a time when Mexican American groups were consistently denied rental space by white building owners because of their ethnicity.[9] When the young men of *Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello* wanted to rent the Aragon Ballroom in downtown Houston, the owner was initially very skeptical. He envisioned knife fights and drunkenness, and feared the worst. After allowing the club to use the room and seeing no incident, the proprietor admitted, "We Anglos have much to

[9] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 66; Carmen Cortez, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, June 7, 1980.

learn from Mexicans."[10] The owner of the Aragon Ballroom was not alone in his negative perceptions of Mexicans as much of the attention paid to Mexicans in the newspapers consisted of descriptions of criminal activity.[11] Consequently it was common practice for Mexican clubs at this time to use alternative spaces, such as Mexican restaurants, for their meetings and events. Houston was home to fifteen to twenty Mexican American clubs during the 1920s and 1930s, and only a handful of those had their own space. This number decreased during the Depression, as club members struggled to pay dues and many groups lost their rental space because of the lack of funds.[12] La Consentida Café was sometimes used as a meeting place for the Woodmen of the World organization of which Gómez was an active member, and Reyes fondly remembers the restaurant as a hangout spot for her own group *Club Femenino Chapultepec* and the young men's *Club México Bello*. [13] After holding meetings and events, both groups spent the rest of their nights at the restaurant. "The groups used to go over there and get on all on one side of the restaurant they would eat at all those tables and like a banquet for themselves, and all the people that would come in maybe just one or two would come in and sit on the other side and that was 24 hours a day for say 1933 to 1940 or 41," she said.[14] Reyes' first husband, Eulogio Quintanilla, was a member of *México Bello*. As a young woman in her twenties, her nights at the restaurant represent the heyday of her youth. By offering a comfortable space for young men and women of la *colonia* to eat and hang out together,

[10] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt,* 66.
[11] *Houston Chronicle* Index of items relating to Mexican Americans, Arnoldo De Leon Manuscript Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[12] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 68.
[13] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979; Photograph 034, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[14] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.

La Consentida Café represents the importance of Mexican business in providing a comfortable space for Houston's Mexican residents.

Figure 8. Meeting of Woodmen of the World (W. O. W.) of Camp Laurel at La Consentida. Melesio Gómez is second from right, Houston, Texas, 1940, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-48, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

A Neighborhood Business

La Consentida Café was the first Mexican restaurant to open on Washington Avenue.[15] It was established in 1932 the same year as St. Stephen Catholic Church, the first church in the Sixth Ward to serve the Mexican community. St. Joseph Catholic

[15] Directory of the City of Houston, 1920-1940, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

Church, located just a few blocks away, did not allow Mexicans to attend its mass service.[16] The opening of the first Mexican restaurant and first church to serve the Spanish-speaking population was a sign of the significant Mexican presence in the Sixth Ward. Up to this point, Mexican business and social and cultural organizations that served the Mexican population in Houston remained concentrated in the Second Ward and Magnolia Park along with the majority of Mexican residents. Reyes describes her family's restaurant as a welcoming beacon which offered something familiar and friendly to arriving Mexicans in the neighborhood.[17] By the 1960s the Sixth Ward had a majority Mexican American population.[18]

In fact she credits her family's multiple businesses for influencing the growth of the Mexican population around Washington Avenue:

> …a neighborhood was forming around the store and around the restaurant and around the tortilla factory. All [Mexicans] stayed …on Center Street. Families had come in from México and were living there. …since we moved there it was really what I believe made the families move around there. It became a center. …they would say 'Well there's a store,' or 'There's a restaurant over there, we should look for a house around here.' I believe that is what happened. They start moving in around Center Street block from the 15, 16,17,18,19, and 20 up to 24 [blocks] all Mexican families start moving in and all the Anglo families started moving out. So it became a neighborhood of Mexican families.[19]

Multiple factors contributed to the growth of the Mexican population on the west side of downtown, but Reyes' statement reflects how important she saw her family's work. She saw the significance of offering good food and a comfortable and entertaining space to Mexicans in their own neighborhood. During the 1930s in Houston, negative

[16] Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 56-57; De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 57.
[17] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[18] Houston – Wards, Sixth Ward, Vertical File, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[19] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.

perceptions of Mexicans were rampant and denying service to Mexicans was not a crime. That one Houstonian recalled three water fountains in front of Houston's City Hall – one for whites, one for African Americans, and one labeled "hombres aqui" – is a striking example of this racial climate in Houston.[20] Thus Mexican business owners were important in providing non-hostile and friendly spaces for Mexicans. Reyes understood "comfort" as a necessity and she viewed her family's businesses as providers of this type of space.

One longtime resident of the Sixth Ward, Ernest Eguia, recalled dining at La Consentida Café. In fact, when asked in 1979 to describe the Mexican-owned businesses on Washington Avenue when he was young man, La Consentida was the one and only business he discussed. "There was a man that had a very nice café. In those days it was considered very nice. His name was Gómez. He owned a restaurant there called La Consentida. Later on it became a beer joint. But while he had it, it was a nice place. That stands out in my mind," he explained.[21] As a young boy Eguia shined shoes and sold newspapers and Gómez was one of his customers. He described Gómez as "An outstanding businessman. Very fine. Very correct. Right next door to his café he had a tortilla factory. He'd make his own tortillas and sell tortillas and tamales. … He had a couple of daughters there. They worked there too. Very nice looking man. Very correct. Very intelligent man." Eguia's assessment of Gómez as an "intelligent man" suggests that Gómez was well known in the community and well liked. Eguia continued, stating that the Gómez family restaurant was different from other establishments in the area

[20] Ernest Eguia, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, February 25, 1988.

[21] Ibid.

because it was a "neighborhood business."[22] While residents of the Sixth Ward could go into downtown to shop for anything they needed, Eguia suggested that there was not a place anywhere else in Houston quite like La Consentida Café.[23] That La Consentida Café is the only business that Eguia can remember and that he refers to it as a "neighborhood business" suggests the restaurant's strong presence in the Sixth Ward. In fact he directly connects the café to the Sixth Ward and his memories reflect Eguia's strong sense of belonging to the café as a resident of the neighborhood.

Figure 9. Birthday celebration of Melesio Gómez in La Consentida Restaurant, Houston, Texas, 1946, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-40, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

[22] Ernest Eguia, interview.
[23] Ibid.

A Changing Clientele

While La Consentida quickly developed a strong relationship with the Mexican population in Houston, the café was not attracting Anglo patrons the way the tortilla factory was. At the same time that white Houstonians were eating La Nacional's tortillas at places like W.T. Grant's or the Pig Stand No.7, none seemed interested in dining at La Consentida Café at least not until the mid-1940s. The history of Mexican restaurants in the city reveals that white Houstonians were getting their Mexican food from Anglo-owned restaurants. In 1907, when the Mexican population in the city numbered just five hundred, George E. and Bessie Caldwell opened the Original Mexican Restaurant serving "Genuine Mexican Foods Properly Prepared" to an Anglo clientele.[24] By the 1920s the restaurant was host to business people, city and county officials, and even the mayor, Oscar Holcombe.[25] The Caldwells were the first, but certainly not the last, to seize opportunity in the popularity of Mexican food among white Houstonians. In addition to the Original Mexican Restaurant, there existed the Spanish-American Garden in the 1920s (owned by an Anglo) and in the 1930s the Old Mexico Tavern established by William Knorbin (a German American).[26] Similar to the trend for white women to purchase Mexican food products from white food manufacturers was the preference to eat Mexican food from white restaurant owners. According to historian Thomas Kreneck, the general stereotype of this era was that Mexican restaurants were unsanitary, only located in poverty-stricken Mexican neighborhoods, and served food too spicy to enjoy.[27] Furthermore, race relations were such that the idea of dining in the same company as

[24] Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 41.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 41, 58, 71.
[27] Ibid.

Mexicans was not favorable. Restaurants offer a highly social experience. That many civil rights protests have occurred at lunch counters, such as the Weingarten's lunch counter in Houston, reflects the significance of eating a meal in the company of other races.

Yet for the first decade of La Consentida Café's history, the Gómez family served a strictly Mexican clientele. Not until the war period did Reyes recall seeing a change. When asked about the white customers that came into the restaurant, Reyes recalled, "Well at first it was mainly Mexican people. … little by little they [Anglos] started to learn and it ended up that in the last years … we had few Mexican American people eating, and the place full of Anglo Americans. …Really, after the war there was a big change."[28] Originally the restaurant only offered Mexican national dishes (*enchiladas*, *tamales*, *menudo*, *tacos*) as well as what Reyes called *ranchero* food or "dishes that are made at home as a daily menu of a family," which included *calabasita*, *guisados*, and *sopa de fideo*.[29] By 1949, La Consentida was serving a hamburger and French Fries plate for fifty five cents.[30] Other American food items offered include potato salad, "meatballs and spaghetti," and a "Fried Chicken, Lettuce and Tomato Salad, French Fries" plate.[31] That some of these American items were handwritten additions to the menu is significant and suggests that these plates were not anticipated or expected at the time the menu was printed but were requested frequently enough to offer them as well. These additions to the menu provide the most striking evidence of La Consentida's changing clientele.

[28] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[29] Ibid.
[30] La Consentida Café menu, 1949, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[31] Ibid.

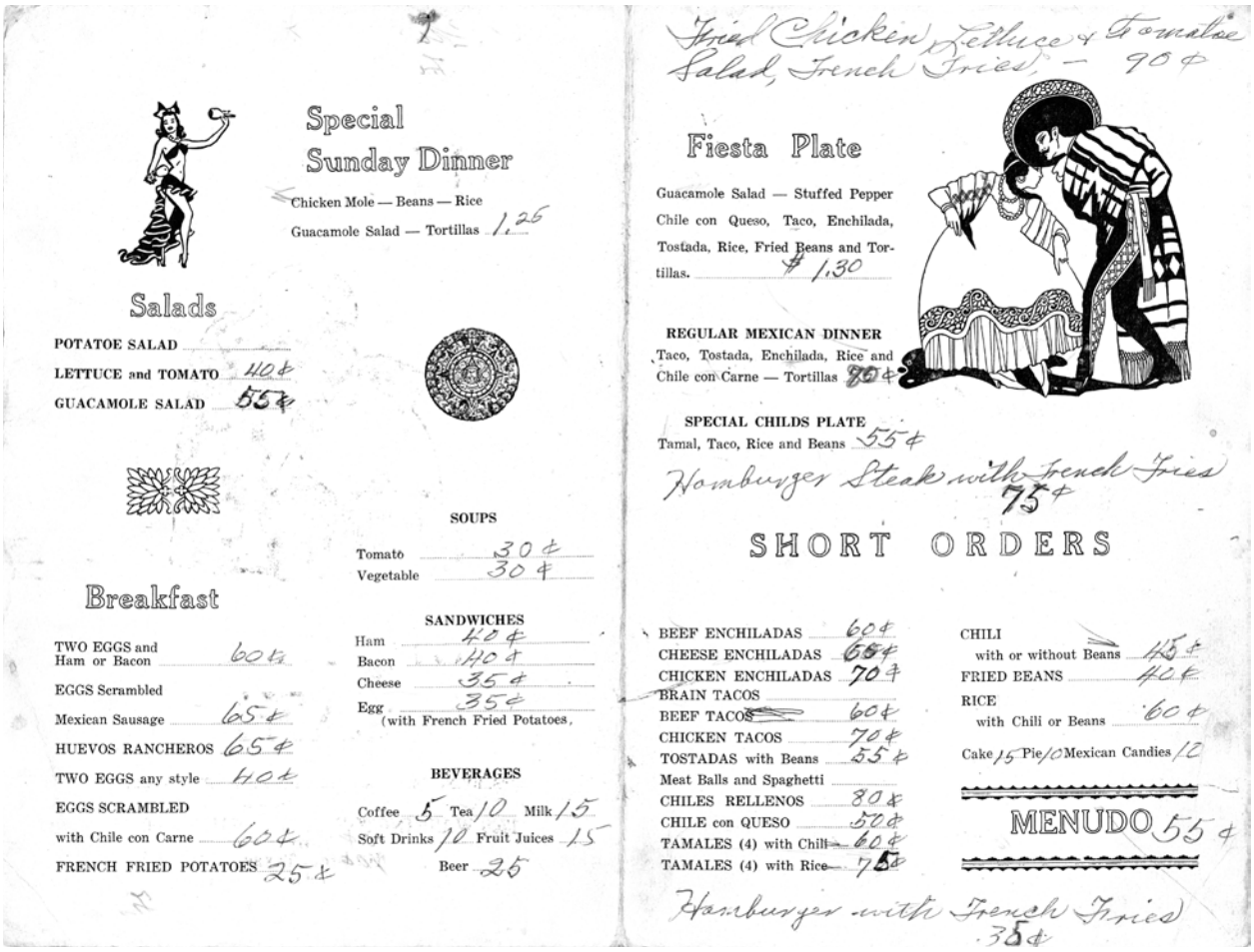

Figure 10. La Consentida Café menu, 1949, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

War Comes to Houston

Three major factors contributed to the changing nature of La Consentida Café in the World War II period: the restaurant's proximity to the war department employees in downtown Houston, the change in demographics of the Mexican population in the city from largely immigrant to largely American-born, and the entrance of Felix Tijerina into Houston's food scene. The onset of World War II Houston saw an influx of federal war department agencies establishing themselves in the city. Reyes recalled "People that were coming from other places to work in these Army jobs …we began to get almost strange

people that still come in. Of course they didn't have the time sit around and enjoy food and the longer hours because they had the job to do. They were working government jobs …"[32] Considering La Consentida Café's location just west of downtown, it is possible that she was referring to the U.S. War Training School located on the northeastern border of the Sixth Ward at 1227 Dart Street or to the employees of the several U.S. military agencies that established themselves in downtown Houston.[33] In 1941 there were eight Army, Navy and Air Centers in the Houston area training approximately 58,000 men.[34] The U.S. Defense Plant Corporation, U.S. War Production Board, U.S. War Finance Committee, U.S. Manpower Commission, and U.S. War Price and Rationing Board are just a few of the many agencies listed in the 1945 Houston City Directory that were not in the city prior to the war.

Rise of an American-Born Mexican Population

The change in clientele and the addition of American food to La Consentida's menu can also be attributed to the changing demographic status of the Mexican community in Houston in the 1940s. The Mexican community in Houston and across the nation in the post-war era was more Mexican American than immigrant. The rise in the number of U.S.-born Mexican Americans across the country created a generation that was more assimilated and acculturated to the United States. As one historian notes "…They viewed this country rather than Mexico as their home."[35] By 1950 five of every six Spanish

[32] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[33] Directory of the City of Houston, 1945, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[34] Directory of the City of Houston, 1942-45, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas; Defense edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, October 26,1941, World War II Vertical File, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[35] Robert Rodríguez, "A Survey of Texas Gulf Coast Area Mexican-American World War II Veterans," (M.A. thesis, University of Houston, 1997), 16-17.

surnamed Houston residents were native born."[36] Research on Mexican Americans during this period reveals a generation that was embracing American consumer culture and trends. Mexican American youth especially expressed a bicultural identity in their dress, language, and tastes in music, movies, and food. In other words they were eating hamburgers and French fries just as much as their white and black neighbors.[37] La Consentida's 1949 menu was bilingual, with Mexican dishes written in Spanish and other handwritten notes in English.[38] Although La Consentida proubly continued "Serving Original Mexican Foods For Years," the bilingual menu with Mexican and American foods also reflected American-born Mexican youth embracing trends in American consumer culture.

This change in demographics, however, went far beyond a change in consumer culture and eating habits. A significant number of Mexican Americans served their country as soldiers and on the home front during World War II, and many did so voluntarily. The great majority of those who were service-age had been born in the United States.[39] Those that participated in the war came out of the experience more vocal and politicized than ever before. Having served their country, offered the ultimate sacrifice, and fought against the doctrine of racial supremacy overseas only to continue experiencing second-class treatment in their own nation was a contradiction met with forceful demands for equality. Unequal treatment stemmed from the continued belief by the larger white society that all Mexicans were foreigners regardless of nationality, and

[36] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*), 98-99.
[37] See Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
[38] La Consentida Café menu, 1949, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[39] Rodríguez, "Mexican-American World War II Veterans," 16-17.

thus lacking in a genuine loyalty to the United States. This misconception was widespread despite Mexican Americans "proving" their American identity in drastic ways such as volunteering for the United States Army, but also in small everyday ways like wanting to order a grilled cheese sandwich at a Mexican restaurant.[40]

Felix Tijerina

Another important factor shaping La Consentida's changing identity was the success of Felix Tijerina in Houston. In 1929 Felix Tijerina was the first Mexican American to open a restaurant outside of the *barrio* in Houston. Aiming to reach the Anglo clientele like his former employers, the Caldwells, he opened the Mexican Inn at 1209 Main Street.[41] Tijerina was Houston's first Mexican American restaurant owner to appeal to this audience. By the time of his death in 1965 there were five Felix Mexican Restaurants in Houston and one in Beaumont, Texas. His influence on the entrance of Mexican food into the mainstream American diet had a direct impact on restaurants like La Consentida Café. At the same time Gómez was serving *ranchero* food to Mexicans, Tijerina was serving modified Mexican food that had little to no spice to Anglos. Tijerina's business strategies employed over the years garnered a steady stream of loyal white customers who would eventually influence Gómez to alter his menu.

While the actual dishes Tijerina served at his restaurants were similar to those served in Mexican restaurants all over Houston, he wrote his menu specifically for the non-Mexican customer. One ad stressed that the food had "the delicate flavor of Mexico

[40] Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez and Emilio Zamora, eds., *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 5-7.

[41] Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 52-53; In 1930, Antonio Reynaga, former business partner with Tijerina, established the Mexico City Restaurant at 3916 Main Street in an Anglo business district.

modified to suit the American taste."[42] At the bottom of each menu he printed the following statement: "For those who have not eaten Mexican food – It is not highly seasoned and is not hot. The hot sauce is served on the table."[43] Additionally, sometime after the 1940s Tijerina changed the spelling of the word "chile" in the dish "chile con carne" to the Americanized "chili con carne."[44] Tijerina frequently advertised his dishes as "fiesta" food, claiming that the meals he served were eaten in Mexico only on special occasions. In actuality the food was basically the same as any Mexican restaurant at the time, and these were certainly not dishes strictly eaten during celebrations. This exaggeration was a way for Tijerina to package his restaurant as an exciting and exotic experience and it worked. Most important to his strategy for success was the location of all his restaurants. These were established in or very near Houston neighborhoods with majority middle or upper-class white residents. Thus, at the core of Tijerina's business approach was accommodation. Gómez, on the other hand, was initially not attempting to cater to white customers and this had a direct impact on the business decisions that both entrepreneurs made. Nothing reveals this difference better than the story of how Gómez handled a shortage of employees during World War II.

While all three of Gómez's businesses were established before the 1940s, Reyes recalls the restaurant as being most affected by the war. A reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* described the situation for American restaurant owners in 1943 as follows: "Besides their current ration worries, restaurant men must puzzle over how to replace lost employees, get scarce silverware and dishes, maintain their equipment in working

[42] Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 107.
[43] Restaurant Menus, n.d., Felix Tijerina Sr. Family Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[44] Ibid.

condition and handle an ever increasing number of customers"[45] Reyes recalls that the lack of "Mexican help" affected the family restaurant during World War II.[46] Until the 1940s, the Gómez family never had any trouble finding Mexican cooks and wait staff to work at the café. La Consentida Café was not alone in these issues. A 1943 advertisement for Felix Mexican Restaurant explained that its table service was not "up to the old Felix standard" due to "the shortage of experienced employees," even as they promised good food as long as it was available.[47]

The shortage of employees to work at La Consentida Café was likely due to many of Houston's Mexican American males volunteering or being drafted into armed services, staff members leaving service jobs for war industry jobs with better pay, and a decrease in the number of Mexican immigrants entering Houston. It is estimated that 300,000 to 500,000 Mexican Americans across the country served in World War II, or between 2.5 and five percent of the Mexican American population.[48] One historian explains "Industry needed labor and to meet that demand thousands of new residents streamed into Houston in the war years, straining the city's housing supply and the local government's ability to deliver services. Among those who gained employment in war industries were large number of women, African Americans and Mexicans, all of whom had been barred from many such high paying jobs in peacetime."[49] These factors may have combined to leave the Gómez family struggling to find Mexican cooks and waitresses to work at their restaurant.

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[45] Ellis Haller, "Eating Out: Rationed and Restaurants, Just as Housewives Must Stretch Food," *Wall Street Journal* February 23, 1943.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 90.
[48] Rodríguez, "Mexican American World War II Veterans," 11.
[49] Ibid.

Gómez eventually hired an African American woman to help. According to Reyes:

> It was really hard to get help. We even hired a colored woman in the kitchen, which was very new at that time. Even in a Mexican restaurant it was something new. But we found this lady named Ella May and she learned quickly. …she had a hard time taking orders from my father, but my mother would understand and she would show her what to do. She [Ella May] was the best worker we ever had. Then later on when we had trouble with waitresses; we couldn't find any waitresses, this lady was so dressed nice like she was supposed to. Clean in her white uniform, white stockings, her head band and all. So once in a while my father would put her out in the front to wait on the people. Some people didn't like it. He said 'well this is all I have and she's a good waitress.' So it came that we were all glad that Ella May could help. And Ella would come take care of the tables, run to the kitchen take care of the dishes. Ella May was a good helper during the war.[50]

Ella May's employment at La Consentida Café is significant due to the racial tensions that existed between Mexicans and African Americans at this time. From the start of Mexican migration to Houston there existed competition between the two groups over jobs. This tension was exacerbated by the fact that Mexicans enjoyed some rights that blacks did not. For example Mexicans did not have to give up their seat for a white person on Houston's streetcars. The reverse was also true. Mexicans were aware that African Americans enjoyed a stronghold on certain jobs. At the Port of Houston, for example, African Americans used their dominance of the longshoremen trade to limit the number of jobs given to Mexicans in order to secure their own employment.[51]

Gómez made a business decision to hire Ella May despite this racialized atmosphere because he placed the needs of his business above any attempt to comply with any one group's feelings about racial interactions. Most importantly, what this tells

[50] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[51] Steptoe, "Dixie West," 140-150.

us about Gómez as a business owner is that he knew his customers very well. At this time the clientele was beginning to change, but for the most part the Gómez family knew their customers, Mexican customers, personally. Gómez probably felt he could sell the idea of a black waitress without any significant loss in business. He knew he had to deliver a product and that his customer base was substantial enough to allow for some patrons to be upset. Ultimately his strategy was to use the positive relationship he established with the Mexican community to counter any damaging feedback. Thus, even though "some people didn't like it," according to Reyes, it did not have a negative effect on the restaurant.[52]

The ethnic and racial diversity of the Sixth Ward may also have been the reason Gómez was able to hire an African American waitress without a great loss of customers. There was a small black population in the Sixth Ward and Houston's oldest African American neighborhood, Freedman's Town, was located in the Fourth Ward bordering the southeastern edge of the Sixth Ward. Despite their close proximity, there was limited contact between the residents of the two wards. When asked about interactions with African Americans, one Mexican American resident of the Sixth Ward and veteran of World War II responded: "We didn't go to school together. We didn't go the movies together. We didn't go to restaurants together."[53] Even though there may have been limited contact within the Sixth Ward neighborhood, African Americans were more of a presence in this area as opposed to the all-white subdivisions where Felix Mexican Restaurants could be found. Based on Tijerina's own rule not to allow black customers to eat at his restaurants it is highly unlikely that he would have hired an African

[52] Estella Reyes, interview, June 22, 1979.
[53] Ernest Eguia, interview.

American waiter even during such staff shortages. Had he served African Americans alongside white Houstonians before this time, Tijerina would most likely have lost loyal patrons.[54]

By the end of World War II the several business strategies Tijerina employed had garnered him a loyal Anglo customer base, respect from Houston's elites (both Anglo and Mexican), and a considerable amount of media coverage.[55] By 1950, a *Houston Chronicle* article called Felix's "a must for out-of-town tourists"[56] One *Houston Post* article pictured Tijerina courteously opening the doors to his latest establishment, emphasizing his "Latin" charm.[57] He was even featured in the society pages of the *Houston Press*.[58] Most importantly this media coverage was less on Mexican food and more on Tijerina himself. In the eyes of the public, Tijerina and the restaurant were one and the same. In 1948 the first biographical article on Felix Tijerina appeared. It told Felix's rags to riches story. It was a significant feat for a biographical feature on a Mexican American to appear in a mainstream Houston newspaper. The article stressed his hard work and sacrifice. Interestingly, as Kreneck notes, this piece did not mention Tijerina's ethnicity nor his participation and leadership in numerous Mexican American clubs. The author concluded by emphasizing Felix as an example of how "America is the land of opportunity."[59]

This focus on Tijerina as Houston's "premier Latin American" was significant to the collective mentality of Houston and their image of Mexican Americans (or "Latin

[54] Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 101.
[55] Ibid., *108.*
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.,107.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., 109-110.

Americans"). Tijerina's popularity did not by any means completely eliminate ethnic stereotypes, but by creating friendly and positive cultural interactions he most definitely played a part in eliminating the general wariness of Anglos regarding Mexican business (restaurants in particular) in Houston. The significance of the Felix Mexican Restaurant chain to Houston's food scene is best summarized by one historian's statement that "Eating at the Tijerina's establishment provided a cultural and culinary experience to several generations of Houstonians for whom the actual customs and foodways of their 'neighbor to the South' might otherwise not proved as accessible. A trip to Felix offered them a seemingly foreign experience in a familiar setting."[60] By contrast, Gómez opened his restaurant for Mexican residents all over Houston. With Felix Tijerina's rise to fame came a startling change in white perceptions of Mexican restaurants, which quickly changed patronage at La Consentida Café from only Mexican to a mixed clientele of both Mexican and Anglo. Essentially Tijerina's popularity opened the door for Gómez to reach this new clientele. Prior to the mid-1940s the Gómez family restaurant was likely viewed by white Houstonians in the same negative light as other Mexican businesses. Tijerina became the first successful positive image of a Mexican American restaurant owner and this ultimately led to more white patronage of other Mexican-owned establishments.

The opening of La Consentida Café on Washington Avenue was well received by the general Mexican population in Houston, especially the Sixth Ward's Mexican residents. The café offered familiar food in a comfortable setting and provided an entertaining atmosphere for the Mexican community amidst an often hostile environment.

[60] Chrystel Pit, "Deal With Us: The Business of Mexican Culture in Post-World War II Houston," (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 2011), 198.

Whereas before World War II Reyes recalled serving mostly Mexican patrons (and knew many of the customers personally), in the post-war years the restaurant served an increasing number of white Houstonians. The high number of war department employees that settled near the Sixth Ward during World War II, the change in demographics within the Mexican community in Houston, and Felix Tijerina's rise to fame significantly changed the nature of La Consentida Café resulting in a menu with American items next to its Mexican food offerings.

The dramatic difference between the family's tortilla factory and their restaurant, regarding the types of relations built with white Houstonians, offered the Gómez daughters an important lesson on the perceptions of Mexican products and accommodation. Following in her father's footsteps, Estella Reyes would open her own business in 1937 and like Gómez, she would build strong relationships with Mexican and white customers. Unlike her father, however, Reyes would attempt to balance her interest in entrepreneurship with her activism.

Chapter 4: The Mexican Products and Curio Shop

Estella Reyes opened the Mexican Products and Curio Shop in 1937 on the same block of Washington Avenue as the family's other establishments. Like La Nacional Tortilla Factory and La Consentida Café the curio shop would gain popularity with both Mexican and Anglo customers. Reyes' story is unique however in that she participated in the activism of the day. In the 1930s and 1940s Mexican Americans across the country were participating in and leading activities in protest of the Mexican community's second-class status and treatment. This activism ranged from outright rebellion to more subtle forms of engagement and reflected the diversity in class status, ideology, and experience among Mexican Americans.[1] Reyes' desire to speak out for her community grew out of her participation in the social club that she co-founded: *Club Femenino Chapultepec*. That her activism was relatively tame stems from her middle class status and the type of leadership rising in Houston during those years. However, her story is complicated by her role as an entrepreneur. As owner and manager of the Mexican Products and Curio Shop, established in 1937, Reyes developed a strong Anglo customer base. Attempting to protest the unfair treatment of the Mexican community by the larger Anglo society while at the same time selling Mexican products to Houston Anglos essentially placed Reyes in a balancing act. This chapter will describe how Reyes came to establish the curio store, how she came into her activism, and how she negotiated these two roles.

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[1] See Richard García, "The Making of a Mexican American Mind, San Antonio, Texas, 1929-1941: A Social and Intellectual History of an Ethnic Community," (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 1980); Gabriela González, "Carolina Munguía and Emma Tenayuca: The Politics of Benevolence and Radical Reform," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 24, no. 2 (2003): 200-229.

Figure 11. A picture of Estella Gómez while she was in high school, Houston, Texas, 1929, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-11, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

The Mexican Products and Curio Shop

In the late 1930s Reyes rented a stand to sell Mexican candies. Upon making five hundred dollars in profit she approached her father to ask how this money should be invested. Gómez suggested that she start selling spices. He explained that people were in

need of peppers and spices and advised that she buy only those that do not spoil as Reyes did not own a cooler at this time. At this time the United States was just a few years away from officially entering World War II and food rationing was just around the corner. Reyes took her father's advice and purchased five hundred dollars' worth of black pepper. This was the beginning of The Mexican Products and Curio Shop.[2]

As owner of her own business, Reyes began to establish loyal customers almost immediately. Reyes stated "Nobody thought it [black pepper] was going to sell and because it hadn't been selling nobody had it in stock. Black pepper doesn't spoil. They call it the golden grain. I invested in barrels and barrels of black pepper, probably four, five, or six barrels [at] 250 pounds each. I had my supply and I started selling spices. …my lucky day came when I sold all my black pepper a little at a time."[3] Over a period of five years Reyes rationed her black pepper supply to different business owners in the city. One of her customers owned a restaurant selling barbeque in the far west side of Houston. Every week Reyes would separate enough black pepper for him and the other customers who regularly purchased from her. Reyes credits her supply of black pepper for successfully getting her through World War II.[4] Food rationing during the war left many American businesses struggling to survive, including the Gómez family's restaurant. Reyes remembered that "…the supply of some of the foods was not as good as before because some of the foods were imported. Some kinds of peppers were imported and that supply was even harder to get. The most important things that we use in some of the dishes, like cheese, it was rationed so we had to reduce the amount we were making

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[2] Estella Reyes, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, June 8, 1979.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

according to how much cheese we could get. Even beans, we had to reduce that. The only thing we had enough of was corn to make the tortillas and peppers and tomatoes."[5] It is likely that the Gómez family shared supplies between the needs of La Consentida Café and Reyes' curio shop. After the war, Reyes received a letter from the owner of the barbeque restaurant expressing how grateful he was to get black pepper during the war. She recalled that her rate was less than the price at other stores at this time. "Besides I didn't charge him [owner of the barbeque restaurant] out of this world. I think it was $2.75 a pound. ... I could have, but I didn't want to be the kind of person that tries to use the conditions at that time to make a little extra money."[6]

Following the war, Reyes began to sell Mexican products in addition to spices. Customers would sign a book at the store, leave their names and addresses, and Reyes would call them upon acquiring the items they wanted. Initially one of her most frequently requested products was pink glassware from south of the border. Reyes used her connection with friends in Mexico to acquire her products. "They wanted pink glasses. Pink glassware is hard to find. So I made it my business to find pink glassware. I used to have friends in Monterrey and I used to say 'go look for a set of pink glasses for that lady.' I enjoyed it very much."[7]

The quick transition from selling only spices to selling all types of Mexican products was a success and brought positive media attention to the store. In the 1950s the *Houston Chronicle* ran several feature articles on Reyes and her shop. These were written in 1951 and 1959 and specifically focused on two of her many products: piñatas and

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[5] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

Mexican jumping beans. At this time Reyes was Houston's only professional manufacturer of piñatas and she was selling just as many to Anglos as she was to "Latins."[8] She sold handmade piñatas (that she made herself) as well as piñatas imported from Mexico. Hers was also the only store selling Mexican jumping beans (*brincadores*). The jumping beans came directly from the state of Sonora, Mexico.[9]

The *Houston Chronicle* writer, Sigman Byrd, who wrote about Reyes, was a well-known columnist whose articles focused on a variety of colorful and interesting people in Houston. Soon after the first article was printed about the jumping beans and why they jump, Reyes began to receive phone calls, letters, and walk-ins asking specifically about the beans. A young girl from Bellaire wrote "I have heard of those beans that jump. Here is 50 cents. Please send me whatever that will buy."[10] Byrd included the following incident in his article about Mrs. Reyes: "The other day a limousine pulled up in front of Mrs. Reyes' shop and a chauffeur got out and opened the door. Two lovely, rich, white-haired ladies got out and came into the shop. Mrs. Reyes had a big platter of *brincadores* on the counter. The beans were jumping like grasshoppers and making a noise like a hot tin roof. 'Then Mr. Byrd was telling the truth, after all!' gasped the ladies. 'They really do jump, don't they?' 'I always told you Mr. Byrd had an honest face,' said the other. They bought $1 worth of the jumping beans."[11] Like the customers of La Nacional Tortilla Factory, the curio shop attracted both Mexicans familiar with the products being offered and non-Mexicans interested in (and often intrigued) by Mexican culture. Reyes

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[8] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[9] Newspaper clippings, 1951, 1959, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Newspaper clippings, 1951, 1959, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

kept a file on many of the products she carried that included a history of the item. She was eager to educate Houstonians on the history and cultural significance of the Mexican products in her store. This was a successful strategy as Byrd's articles can attest. Reyes' understanding of the importance of educating Anglo customers about Mexican products likely came as a result of her experience working at the tortilla factory with her father, especially those days she spent with Gómez explaining the art of the enchilada.

Figure 12. Estella Quintanilla Gómez in ' Mexican Products and Curios,' Houston, Texas. 1939, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-39, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

Her Father's Influence

Reyes was very much influenced by her father in terms of how she managed her business as well as her personal life. Encouraged by her father, Reyes had always defied

society's limited definition for what Mexican American women could do. She ignored the few naysayers who questioned what she could possibly do with a high school degree and in 1929 was the first Mexican American female to graduate from Sam Houston High School. Upon gaining her diploma, Reyes immediately enrolled at Massey Business College where she learned shorthand in English. The cost of tuition was twenty dollars per month and although this was a steep price to pay, her father saw the value in his daughter's education. In fact, Gómez held a philosophy about his daughters in the workforce that was ahead of his time. Reyes recalled "He would say all the time 'I want my daughters to learn to work so they will be able to work and make their own living. So they won't have to depend on welfare or begging around for food. Never. My daughters never. I want them to have as much education as I can give them. I want to be able to help them as much as I can."[12] It was understood in the Gómez family that his daughters would work and never become dependent on a husband. If his daughters' husbands became ill or could not make ends meet financially, Gómez wanted to ensure that his daughters had skills and could use them to support themselves. This emphasis on independence, while generally speaking was ahead of its time, was likely based on his concern regarding the unstable times of the Depression Era. Reyes recalled that many young men during the 1930s were making very little money and there was the need for women to work. Reyes married one of those young men in 1935, Eulogio Quintanilla. When he passed away just a few years later, Reyes was left with no choice but to heed her father's words and she opened the curio shop a year later.[13] Growing up with this

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[12] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[13] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979; A search of the City Directory of Houston reveals her husband died sometime between 1936 and 1937.

emphasis on independence had a profound impact on Reyes. She was self-employed her entire life, managing the curio shop for over thirty years, and was one of only a handful of Mexican American female entrepreneurs in Houston.

Mexican Women Entrepreneurship

In Texas, while most Mexican women living in the cities earned meager wages working in commercial laundries, food production factories, and textile industries, there were many who succeeded as entrepreneurs.[14] Many Texas Mexican women have historically made a living selling food. Faustina Porras Martínez founded a restaurant in Dallas in 1918, one of the first Mexican restaurants in the city.[15] Fellow Dallas native and single mother María Luna opened Luna Tortilla Factory in 1924 in the Mexican *barrio*. Her factory was so successful that by the 1930s she was running a home delivery service to Mexican *barrios* in other Texas cities.[16] Around this same time in Corpus Christi, Señora Reyes Ibarra graduated from Granger College and opened the Little Mexican Inn. She then diversified her business interests by purchasing real estate in San Antonio.[17] Adelaida Cuellar of Kaufman, Texas began as a tamale vendor in 1926. Cuellar's success led her to open a restaurant. Her sons used their mother's recipes to open restaurants in other parts of Texas throughout the 1930s, including Houston. They named their chain "El Chico's" and it soon became one of the largest Mexican restaurant franchises of its time.[18] In Houston, Eciquia Castro operated a café in the early 1900s.

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[14] Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten, *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 117.
[15] Ibid., 118.
[16] Ibid., 121.
[17] Ibid., 119.
[18] Palomo Acosta and Winegarten, *Las Tejanas*, 119-120.

She was a member of the founding generation of Mexican Americans in Houston.[19] In the 1920s Maria Sarabia, of the well-known Sarabia family in Houston, opened a restaurant with her husband Raul Molina.[20]

Mexican women entrepreneurship also took many other forms in the early twentieth century. Texas women have also succeeded as self-employed actors and musicians. Beatríz Escalona Pérez made her stage debut at El Paso's *Teatro Colón* in 1921.[21] In Houston, the legendary Lydia Mendoza was a singer, songwriter, and guitarist. Her first solo single in 1934 *"Mal Hombre"* became her signature song.[22] What these women offer to Reyes' story is the understanding that she was not alone in her role as a Mexican American female business owner at this time. Where Reyes stands out however is in the type of business she managed and the clientele she served. Mexican curio shops have a complicated history in the Southwest and unlike most of the women previously mentioned, Reyes was in the business of selling Mexican products to Anglos.

Selling Mexican Culture

There exist two very different sides to the history of the Mexican curio shop. On the one hand, curio stores were (and continue to be) tourist attractions for Anglo Americans seeking an exotic and entertaining experience. On the other, these stores not only provided decorative items, but also were often the sole providers of Mexican products that newly arrived immigrants to the United States needed on a daily basis, most

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[19] Photograph, Teodoro Castro Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[20] Palomo Acosta and Winegarten, *Las Tejanas*, 119.
[21] Acosta and Winegarten, *Las Tejanas*, 118.
[22] Newspaper Clipping, Lydia Mendoza Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

importantly kitchen tools. Since the nineteenth century both Mexicans and non-Mexicans have gone into the business of selling Mexican curios.[23] "Curio" is the shortened version of the word "curiosity," and in essence curio shops sell curiosities; items that are novel, rare, or bizarre. For non-Mexicans curio stores offered an introduction to Mexican culture without any interaction with Mexican people. Many Southwestern travel guidebooks of the era promoted the Mexican curio shop as a must-see stop for any traveler. In her analysis of U.S.-Mexico border promotion during the early twentieth century, one historian explains how "the border tourist industry commodified Mexican culture in order to amuse, entertain, and ultimately profit."[24] The consumers in this industry were Anglo Americans of various classes. Their desire to consume the experience and goods of an exotic and foreign country led border promoters to create their own version of Mexican culture complete with ethnic stereotypes. Curio shops were a part of this tourist package. The goods they sold reinforced the notion that Mexican culture was meant for Americans' amusement and entertainment.[25]

Not all curio stores fit this mold. The association of Mexican products and curio shops with an American tourist activity does not accurately describe the significance of these stores to the early Mexican immigrants to the United States, especially those in urban cities. They provided items that this minority would not have been able to find in American stores in the early 1900s especially items needed for cooking. The Houston City Directory has included "Curios," "Curio Dealers," and "Mexican Products" as

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[23] Rachel St. John, "Selling the Border: Trading Land, Attracting Tourists, and Marketing American Consumption on the Baja California Border, 1900-1934," in *Land of Necessity: Consumer Culture in the United States-Mexico Borderlands*, ed. by Alexis McCrossen, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 118-119.
[24] Ibid, 122.
[25] Ibid., 123.

business categories since the mid-1920s.[26] One of the first Mexican curio shops in Houston, *Libreria Hispana-Americana,* was owned by the four Sarabia brothers: José, Socorro, Felipe, and Jesus Sarabia.[27] The Sarabia brothers were some of the first businessmen, if not the very first, to cater to the Mexican population in Houston. They opened two shops in the early 1920s located on the eastern edge of downtown at 1821 Congress Avenue and 716 Preston Street. The shops were part library, part curio shop, and part newspaper stand.[28] By the 1930s the Sarabia brothers moved to one larger location at 1803 Congress Avenue and the name was changed to *El Comercio Mexicano*. Products sold here included Mexican baskets, *tortilleras* (tortilla press), and *molcajetes* (mortar and pestle for grinding peppers and other foods).[29] The *molcajete* in particular was an essential tool used in the Mexican kitchen, and had been for centuries. In fact, when the Gómez family left Mexico in 1920 they brought only two things, their savings and their *molcajete*. Reyes remembered "…my father told her [his wife Sergia] 'Don't forget your *molcajete*.' So my mother had to carry it from over there because we needed that for our food."[30] The emphasis on bringing the *molcajete* suggests that families knew such items might be unavailable in the United States, and illustrates the important niche the Sarabia brothers' stores could potentially fill. Later in the 1940s Felipe Sarabia would open his own curio shop called Mexican Curio Shop at 711 Preston.[31] Mexicans in Houston's *colonia*, and elsewhere in the United States, relied on places like this for

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[26] Directory of the City of Houston. 1920, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[27] Arnoldo De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 34-35; It is unclear how involved Felipe and Jesus were with the store. See Socorro Sarabia, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, August 3, 1980.
[28] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 35.
[29] Alfredo Sarabia, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, February 16, 1979. The interview is labeled under Alfredo Sarabia, however, his father Socorro is also in the interview.
[30] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[31] Directory of the City of Houston, 1940, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

familiar and necessary Mexican products. Other curio shops that existed in the 1920s and 1930s include La Nacional at 2007 Congress (no connection to the Gómez family's La Nacional Tortilla Factory), the Pan-American Import Co. in the Second National Bank building, Texas Specialty Co. at 2412 Telephone Road, and Houston Novelty Co. at 1118 Main.[32] These companies were not open for more than five years and by 1940, the Sarabia brothers' curio shops remained the longest standing establishments of this type in Houston.[33] Reyes' shop fell somewhere in between these two extreme types of curio shops.[34] She was not directly targeting Anglo customers nor was she selling items that the Mexican population absolutely needed. The Mexican Products and Curio Shop, like the other family businesses, provided the space for Reyes to build her own business relationships with the non-Mexican community.

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[32] Directory of the City of Houston, 1920 – 1940, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.
[33] Ibid.
[34] One other Houston female entrepreneur saw opportunity in the Mexican products and curio business. With her husband's encouragement, Janie Tijerina, wife to Felix Tijerina, opened a small Mexican curio store in the late 1930s. By this time her husband was a well-known restaurant owner, member of Mexican American and Anglo organizations, and had established himself as a leading member of Houston's Latin American business class. While remaining closely identified with her husband's activities, Janie developed her individual profile in her own business and civic affairs. The store began with just thirty-eight dollars' worth of curios purchased by Felix in Mexico and was originally located in the arcade of the Iris Theatre on Travis Street. By early 1940 Janie moved the store to 811 Capitol Avenue next to the Uptown Theatre between Milam and Travis. By the 1950s the store had moved once more, settling at 906 Texas Avenue across from the Rice Hotel and a much larger "Felix Mexican Curio Shop" could also be found at 1404 Main Street. Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 86, 137.

Club Femenino Chapultepec

At the same time that she was running her business Reyes was an active member of a social club. Reyes was a founding member of *Club Femenino Chapultepec*, the first organization of its kind exclusively for young Mexican American women. *Chapultepec* was formed in 1931 under the sponsorship of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). They would meet once a week in the evening at the YWCA downtown. Topics of discussion included fundraisers, hosting citizenship class, social events such as dances, and how to recruit other young women. *Chapultepec* reflected the bicultural identity of these young Mexican American women. Some, like Reyes, had come to the United States as children during the Mexican Revolution and others were native Texans. The club's name "Chapultepec" was a reference to a historic site in Mexico City (the resting place of Aztec emperors during pre-Columbian times and the site of the last resistance force against American invasion in 1847). Members had also considered naming the club *Azteca*, another reference to Mexican culture. Their loyalty to both Mexico and the United States led them to speak Spanish and English in their meetings. They decided to conduct meetings in English one week and Spanish the next in order to maintain their bilingualism. Reyes, who served as club secretary, explained that "We wanted to show the Anglo American community that we could be good Americans, not just Mexican girls."[35] *Club Chapultepec* often invited their white peers to social events in order to teach them about Mexican culture.

The club was originally created as an athletic, recreational, and social organization but later came to serve as a platform for voicing concerns about the status of

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[35] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.

the Mexican community in Houston.[36] The focus on problems facing the Mexican community in Houston began with a single act of discrimination against *Club Chapultepec,* which laid the foundation for Reyes activism. As members of the YWCA, the club had free use of the YWCA building to host social events. However, as attendance at these events (especially the dances) increased, they decided to rent other ballrooms. The YWCA sponsors agreed they could do so as long as they did not use the YWCA's name in connection with the club. The white owners of ballrooms and dance halls, however, would not rent to *Chapultepec*, as most white Americans at this time associated Mexican parties with violence.[37] Perpetuating this notion were English-language newspapers such as the *Houston Chronicle* and *Houston Post* who reported news about Mexicans only when criminal acts were committed.[38] Soon after this incident the young ladies of *Chapultepec* decided to write down a list of ten issues facing the Mexican American community in Texas based on their experiences and concerns. They drew up a document, drafted by Reyes and treasurer Carmen Cortéz, and titled it "Letter from *Chapultepec*" with the sole intention of raising awareness. In it the group stated that it was time to address Anglo racism against the Mexican community. Reyes, Carmen Cortéz, and Olive Lewis, an Anglo woman who served as sponsor to the club at the YWCA, signed the letter.[39]

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[36] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.; Carmen Cortéz, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 7, 1978; Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary – Writing Chicanas Into History* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 84-91.
[37] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979; Carmen Cortéz, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 7, 1978.
[38] Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 84-91; De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 50.
[39] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979; Carmen Cortéz, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, July 7, 1978; "Letter from Chapultepec," 1932, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

The *Chapultepec* Letter went beyond addressing issues specific to club members but also critiqued other forms of discrimination that were affecting the general Mexican population in Houston. A few key points included the discrimination faced by Mexican Americans when attempting to rent a house, applying for jobs, and renting space for events such as dances and weddings. The sixth item on the list of issues referred to the segregation of Houston's parks. Reyes recalled the popularity of Sam Houston Park among Mexican Americans because smaller parks throughout Houston were known to discriminate against them, especially those with swimming pools. She recounted that when Mexican Americans attempted to visit these smaller parks, fights often broke out with Anglo youth. The list also described the frequent issue of Mexican Americans being falsely accused of crimes. At the heart of this matter, as Reyes recalled, was the language barrier. Without the ability to understand the accusations against them, many Mexican Americans were unable to defend themselves when charged unfairly. Reyes stressed that the point of the letter was not to complain but to state the reality of their situation and raise awareness. She admits that everyone, members of the *colonia* and Anglos, knew of the discrimination that took place and yet the behavior was accepted. For Reyes, it was a matter of the law: "They [Anglos] knew what they were doing and it was accepted because we didn't' know what to do. There was not a law like there is now to protect us."[40]

Reyes (and the entire *Club Chapultepec*) was not the only one noticing or voicing concern over race relations in the 1930s in Houston. This was a decade that saw emergence in Texas of middle class Mexican American activist leaders. One of the most

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[40] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.

visible and active groups was League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Council 60 in Houston. Formed in 1934 the Houston Council was part of the LULAC organization that began in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas. The members of LULAC were Texas Mexicans of the middle-class. These were mostly entrepreneurs and professionals whose efforts focused on the U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry. Membership was restricted to American-born citizens. LULACers held an allegiance to the United States and Texas but were focused on eliminating discrimination and racial prejudice and aimed for legal equality and a voice in local, state, and national politics. During World War II, Council 60 worked closely with the Fair Employment Practices Commission to address job discrimination in the war-connected industries. Also during this time they worked to place the first Mexican American on the Harris County Grand Jury. Council 60 formed the "Anti-Segregated Mexican School Committee" to fight discrimination in Houston schools and they took the lead in recognizing Mexican American war heroes, most famously Medal of Honor recipient Marcario García from Sugarland.[41]

The *Club Chapultepec* would never reach the size and status that organizations like LULAC did, but they just as concerned about the issues of the day and their actions drew the same criticisms by white Houstonians as any action LULAC took. The *Chapultepec* letter was addressed to Miss Leona B. Hendrix of Kansas City, Missouri with the National Council of Business and Professional Women of the YWCA and was picked up by the branch of the YWCA for African Americans.[42] She remembered "The branch of the YWCA for the colored people they heard about it and asked to borrow the

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[41] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 89-93.
[42] "Letter from *Chapultepec*."1932. Gómez, Melesio Family Collection. Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Houston, Texas.

letter and copy and publish it in their magazine."[43] While Reyes did not speak of any positive changes that came about because of their letter, she described the negative response that came from outside of the YWCA. Those that complained to the association argued that the purpose of clubs like *Chapultepec* was supposed to be purely recreational and educational, certainly not for complaining or critiquing the status quo. After the letter was published the club was censured and accused of having communist sentiments. Olive Lewis was fired and never heard from again. The new sponsor was expected to discourage any discussion of racism in Houston again.

Reyes soon began to receive visits from the FBI who questioned her activities. Anti-communist sentiment was still very strong as the country was in the midst of a Red Scare that linked foreigners with communism, and as mentioned in previous chapters, Mexicans regardless of place of birth were viewed this time as foreign and un-American. Much of the focus on Mexicans also stemmed from the numerous labor organizing efforts occurring along the Texas-Mexico border at this time. While some of these efforts could be directly linked to communist party affiliation, much of the suspicion was based on false evidence and racial profiling.[44] In fact anyone who voiced concerns against American society even concerns against racism was subject to suspicion by authorities. The FBI between 1932 and 1942 harassed Reyes on several occasions. In 1937, FBI agents visited her at her shop. They interrogated her endlessly about her religion, her friends, and the newspapers she read, although they never outright asked if she was a communist. In 1937 alone she was visited four times. After that year she would receive a

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[43] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[44] Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology & Identity*, 1839-1960, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 182-185.

call twice a year. Agents often parked across the street from her shop. On one occasion the FBI even went so far as to question employees at La Nacional Tortilla Factory next door. [45]

The harassment from federal agents did not stop her from writing a speech in 1941 about "Mexican Problems." She was invited to speak, as a representative of the *Club Chapultepec*, before *La Federacion de Sociedades Mexicanas y Latinas Americanas de Texas* (The Federation of Mexican and Latin American Societies, FSMLA) in Galveston, August of 1941. In the 1930s alongside the many social and fraternal societies in Houston the FSMLA had emerged as part of the larger Texas organization. The idea behind this organization was that while there already existed a history of groups and leaders working on behalf of the rights and needs of Mexicans in Texas, a larger umbrella organization was needed to bring about real change at a higher level. In Houston, some of the FSMLA's activities included social and health exhibitions at the Rusk School and workshops for the working-class to explain Social Security. They also worked with the consul regarding segregation in schools. In 1941 they succeeded (at least temporarily) to get Wharton County (Southwest of Houston) to remove signs in public places that read "Mexicans Not Allowed." During the war years they assigned a fact finding committee to study the issues affecting Mexicans in Houston.[46]

When Reyes was invited to speak at the FSMLA conference the FBI was still watching her. The organization was meeting to discuss the discrimination in Texas. She was prepared to give the speech, which was basically an expansion on the previous "Letter from *Chapultepec*." The speech called for the acquisition of an official lawyer or

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[45] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[46] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 71-76.

consultant to help the various organizations in the defense of rights for Mexicans in Houston, and highlighted eight specific issues regarding the discrimination of Mexicans based on race. These included unfair salary and work hours, segregated schools and public facilities, and immigrant rights. Unfortunately, the speech was never given and Reyes was prevented from speaking at this event. Before she could begin speaking, the Mexican consul approached her and advised her not to give the speech as it might be interpreted as anti-American and may cause trouble for the organization with the U.S. government.[47] That the FSMLA was careful not to sound un-American was reflective of most organizations in Houston at this time. In the 1930s and 1940s there were no massive protests in Houston. Not one club was demonstrating or picketing for racial equality.[48] The activism in Houston was largely rising from the middle-class. The social standing of activists groups like LULAC, the FSMLA, and *Chapultepec* shaped their particular form of protest. They were against what they considered radical activism, such as protesting and striking, and they instead sought to work with the system and not to overthrow it.[49] Thus, when organizers asked Reyes not to give her speech, the FSMLA was acting in typical fashion for this era in Houston. Still, it affected the club and Reyes personally. For the second time, she was asked to refrain from voicing her concerns. *Club Chapultepec* survived just four more years after this incident. The war period interrupted meetings and many of the *Chapultepec* "girls" were now married. *Chapultepec* was a

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[47] "Letter from Chapultepec," 1932, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas; Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary – Writing Chicanas Into History* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 84-91.
[48] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 94.
[49] De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 80-82.

significant unifying force for its members and tells the little known story of women as early as the 1930s speaking out against discriminatory practices in Houston.

Figure 13. Women lined up at Chapultepec picnic in San Jacinto Battle Grounds, Estella Gómez is second from right, San Jacinto, Texas, 1932, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Photo MSS 135-65, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas.

A Balancing Act

At the same time she was writing letters about discrimination, Reyes continued to sell Mexican products to white Houstonians. Essentially Reyes was in a balancing act between an unjust social space and her role as a successful entrepreneur in a profitable business market. What's more, she was equally passionate about speaking out against racist practices in Houston as she was about her products. Reyes' role as a business owner, and the particular type of business that she managed, directly affected the level of activism she participated in. Not only was she operating the shop a full-time job that warranted much of her attention, but also the curio store attracted a large Anglo customer

base. Possibly ruining the positive business relationships she established with this population of Houston and her reputation as a storeowner were not things she was willing to risk. She was proud of her business and the products she sold. Furthermore, Reyes was written about in the press and well liked in the community. Even before Reyes opened her own store her experience working with her father exposed her to building good relationships with the Anglo community. At the tortilla factory in particular she saw first-hand the benefits of working with non-Mexican customers. Her experience accompanying her father to show white chefs how to make enchiladas and educating children about Mexican food convinced her that establishing relationships with the Anglo community could garner acceptance and mutual respect. This was a typical philosophy held by those in the middle-class. In fact, by the era of WWII many Mexicans in Houston held the same consciousness as those members of LULAC. Further, as previously mentioned Houston did not see much radical activism at this time, so Reyes was not exposed to or encouraged to do anything different from what she always known. This philosophy shaped her sense of self as a business owner and concerned citizen.

Reyes never pursued any other forms of community activism after the FMLAS conference. There were several reasons why she limited her activism to the writing of the infamous letter in 1932 and the conference speech in 1941. Reyes' choice to give her speech at the FLMAS conference on the status of Mexican Americans in the United States was a show of her defiance in the face of continued harassment from the U.S. government and a validation of her letter written nearly ten years before. Up to that point, it had been members from larger Anglo society, the YWCA administration and the FBI, that had kept her silent. Reyes likely never expected that members at the conference,

members of her own community, would censor her speech. In addition, Reyes believed in "working together and doing things peacefully."[50] Her definition of activism did not include, as she described it, "protesting and demanding things," and thus the incident at the conference was a point of departure for her.[51] Furthermore, her family's reputation, her own financial responsibilities, and her relationship with the YWCA prevented her from continuing to work for activist causes. The Gómez family businesses were prominent fixtures on Washington Avenue and had earned a good reputation by the war years. Reyes was troubled by the fact that FBI agents had gone so far as to visit the family's tortilla factory to question employees regarding her possible communist affiliation. That her actions might affect the family name and businesses in a negative way may have weighed heavily on her mind and prevented her from taking further action. In addition to this concern, the sudden death of her husband roughly four years after she wrote the "letter from *Chapultepec*" shifted her focus from community issues to personal financial responsibilities. Having only been married for a short time Reyes was now a young widow. Following her father's footsteps Reyes opened her own business. Managing the store completely on her own was a full-time job. Additionally Reyes had developed a good relationship with the Anglo women of the YWCA. Despite the letter incident, Reyes and the entire *Club Chapultepec* continued to stay active with the YWCA. Reyes saw the good she was able to do as a member of the organization (hosting citizenship classes and community events) and chose not to jeopardize this relationship. [52]

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[50] Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Correspondence to Estella Reyes (known as Stella Quintanilla at that time), 1950, Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Texas; Estella Reyes, interview, June 8, 1979.

Having grown up in the business industry Reyes made a natural transition into a business owner herself. Her experience with the tortilla factory and the café gave her a positive outlook on the formation of business relationships with the Mexican and non-Mexican community. For Reyes these relationships could foster a better understanding between the two groups. The climate of middle-class activism in Houston encouraged this thinking. Her positive business experience was countered by the negative experience she endured while speaking out against discrimination as a member of *Club Chapultepec*. When attempting to find a balance between her role as an entrepreneur and her voice as an activist Reyes ultimately chose the curio shop. While activism is not present in her father's story, it played a significant role in Reyes' life.

Conclusion

La Nacional Tortilla Factory, La Consentida Café, and The Mexican Products and Curio Shop stood on the 1700 block of Washington Avenue for roughly three decades. In the 1960s, death in the family led to the shuttering of all three businesses. Sergia Gómez was diagnosed with cancer in 1964 and died that same year. Three years later, the family's youngest daughter Mary Gómez died in 1967, having been ill for a several years. By this point in time Mary was acting manager of the La Consentida Café. With her passing came the closing of the family restaurant. In 1968, Melesio Gómez passed away. Reyes, the only daughter left living in Houston, made the difficult decision to close the remaining tortilla factory and curio shop.[1] She recalled:

> … I was left to make decisions. He [Gómez] would have liked for me to keep the tortilla factory. … but I worked for almost eleven months more after he passed away …and I finally thought that the end had to come. I was the only one of the family working, along with the help, and I thought it was the right time to end the business of the tortilla factory too. The last businesses of Melesio Gómez and Sergia Martínez Navarro de Gómez who were my parents and worked … to put ourselves in a standard [that was] a little higher than other Mexican American people in order to have a better life in the country we had chosen.[2]

Melesio Gómez 's tortilla factory was a new concept to Houston at the time of its opening. The Mexican population was not used to the idea of purchasing tortillas nor was the Anglo population fully educated in Mexican food products and customs. Yet there was a demand for this product from both communities. For Mexican women in Houston the option to purchase fresh tortillas was a welcome change as many of them worked outside the home. For white-grocery store owners in Houston a tortilla factory offered a chance to keep up with national and regional trends. When La Nacional opened, white

[1] Estella Reyes, interviewed by Thomas Kreneck, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, June 8, 1979.
[2] Ibid.

Houstonians were reading Mexican food recipes in the newspapers and seeing Walker's Mexican Chili Powder on grocery store shelves. Adding to this was the growing visibility of the Mexican community. They were hosting dances in the downtown ballrooms, opening businesses in downtown, hosting grand affairs for Mexican national holidays, and attending white schools. The opening of the tortilla factory on the west side of downtown not only signaled the Sixth Ward's transformation from an ethnically-mixed neighborhood to a predominantly Mexican one, it also reflects a significant moment in the adoption of Mexican culture into Houston's mainstream identity.

Historian Chrystel Pit's in-depth examination of cultural interactions between Mexican Americans and Anglos in post-World War II Houston analyzed cultural exchanges that were non-confrontational, specifically ethnic festivals, Spanish-language radio programming, and the Mexican restaurant industry.[3] Her analysis reveals that these exchanges introduced Mexican culture to Houstonians of all backgrounds and in turn they came to accept this culture as a "natural part of the city's life."[4] She concludes that "this greater acceptance of certain aspects of Mexican culture signaled the gradual penetration of Mexican American ethnicity into American cultural ways."[5] While Pit focuses on Mexican American business men and women in the post-World War II era who repackaged ethnicity as something to be consumed, the Gómez family tortilla factory forces us to begin our search for positive cultural exchanges in earlier decades, exchanges that came about without the need for Gómez to repackage ethnicity.

[3] Chrystel Pit, "Deal With Us: The Business of Mexican Culture in Post-World War II Houston" (Ph.D. diss.,University of Arizona, 2011).
[4] Ibid, 7.
[5] Ibid, 8.

Intercultural exchanges such as those that Pit examines were very much in play in the Gómez family's many business ventures. Gómez opened La Consentida Café in 1932 specifically catering to the Mexican population in Houston. Advertisements of the 1930s invited Mexicans from Houston and Magnolia Park to experience something special: live music, a dance floor, and a family atmosphere. La Consentida's location in the Sixth Ward was especially significant to the neighborhood Mexican community because most Mexican businesses were located on the other side of downtown. The war years signaled a change in the types of customers that entered the café. Reyes could no longer name every Mexican face dining at their tables. Instead customers were "strangers," brought to Houston because of the war. Additionally customers in this decade were more likely to be Mexican American instead of Mexican nationals. At the same time, Felix Tijerina's Mexican restaurant was a favorite among Houston's white population. Tijerina had an impact on the way white people saw Mexican restaurants owned by Mexicans, thus affecting the Mexican food industry in Houston. By the 1950s La Consentida was serving a mainly Anglo clientele and the addition of American food items to the restaurant's menu is evidence of this change.

Sitting on the same block of Washington Avenue as the tortilla factory and café was The Mexican Products and Curio Shop, opened by the Gómez family's middle daughter Estella Reyes in 1937. Although certainly influenced by her family's business endeavors, her membership in *Club Chapultepec* gave her a voice for activism. Like many young persons of her generation, she saw the need to speak out against the second-class status of Mexicans in Houston and elsewhere. Her role as a business owner and the

negative experiences she encountered while speaking on her community's behalf led Reyes to focus solely on the positive business relations.

The Gómez family story is unique because of the relationships they developed with the non-Mexican community. So much scholarly focus has been on the impact of American culture on Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, specifically the process of acculturation process and assimilation. This thesis, guided by Reyes' frequent references to Anglos "learning" about tortillas, or "learning" about Mexican food, shows that white Houstonians were also significantly influenced by Mexican culture. How the Gómez family was able to reach the Anglo population was due to their location in the Sixth Ward.

The history of the Gómez family raises interesting questions about the significance of neighborhood. As described in the introduction, the scholarship on Mexican businessmen and women has focused largely on those located in areas with a majority Mexican population. This thesis, however, describes a family whose businesses were not catering to an existing Mexican neighborhood but instead they helped create a Mexican community beyond the borders of the *barrio* and contributed to the transformation of Houston. By the 1960s, as the Gómez family businesses were on the cusp of closing, the Sixth Ward was home to a large Mexican community. That something as familiar as tortillas or Mexican food could persuade a family to move into a mixed-neighborhood expands our view of how Mexican business aided in the development of neighborhoods; Mexican business was not just a reaction to this development.

Estella Reyes recognized the significance of her family's businesses. In the oral history interviews Reyes states confidently that the factory and café were positive influences on the community. Nothing reflects this more than her actively approaching the Houston Metropolitan Research Center to donate her family records. The Melesio Gómez Family Collection represents one of the larger, finer collections dealing with Mexican American history in Houston. The collection consists of photographs, business receipts, newspaper clippings and correspondence. These items were assembled by the family over the years and they chronicle not only this family's life, but represent a microcosm of Hispanic Houston during those years. That Reyes kept these records is a form of agency. Keeping her history was an attempt to preserve the Gómez family story.

So many different aspects of life in Houston's Mexican *colonia* can be seen from this family's story. Melesio Gómez's employment with the Southern Pacific reveals just how important the railroads in Houston were to the development of the Mexican community. Estella Reyes' graduation from high school reflects the opportunities available for Mexicans of the growing middle class. Her writings about the discrimination of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Houston through her membership in the *Club Femenino Chapultepec* show women taking civic action in the 1930s and an awareness of the *colonia's* second-class status. Finally, the family's three businesses in the Sixth Ward tell the seldom heard story of Houston's Mexican business owners. Houston's Mexican business class was in a unique position to build relationships with the non-Mexican community, for both business purposes and also to consciously or subconsciously affect race relations through positive cultural interactions.

While my focus for this thesis was the Gómez family businesses, their story provides areas for further research. One such topic is a comparison of the Sixth Ward to other multi-ethnic neighborhoods in the Southwest, for example Los Angles, where Mexican business owners experienced heavy competition from other ethnic groups all marketing to the Mexican consumer. Another is further analysis of the effect of balancing business ownership with activism.

The Gómez family found success in all three of their businesses: the tortilla factory, the café, and the curio shop. Their middle-class status, strategic business choices, and their location outside of the major Mexican barrio placed the Gómez family in a unique social context. Their story broadens our understanding of the Mexican American business experience in early twentieth century Houston.

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