

Introduction

Unlike San Antonio, Los Angeles, Tucson, Santa Fe, St. Augustine, or even New Orleans the history of Houston is not steeped in a Spanish or Mexican colonial past. Yet as the fourth largest city in the United States, as of 2021 the Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) included 2.7 million Latinos, meaning that this region has the fourth largest Latino population in the country. While the San Antonio MSA includes 54.7 percent Latinos, the actual number of the Latino population in San Antonio is only slightly less than 25 percent of the number of Latinos residing in Houston's MSA.ⁱ Following only Chicago and Los Angeles, Houston has the third largest number of Mexican immigrants in the country.

When compared to the city of San Antonio, which was founded in 1718, Houston's development follows a very different trajectory. The land upon which the city of Houston was built, was purchased by brothers John Kirby Allen and Augustus Chapman Allen in August 1836, a mere four months after the decisive Battle of San Jacinto on April 21st in which the Texian army led by General Sam Houston defeated the army led by Mexican President and General Antonio López de Santa Anna. Santa Anna was captured the next day and many of his soldiers executed. Under duress the Mexican army retreated south of the Rio Bravo and Santa Anna was released following the signing of the Treaty of Velasco in which he recognized Texas's independence in exchange for his freedom.ⁱⁱ The Allen brothers named the city after their friend,

Sam Houston. One might say, then, that the city of Houston arose from the ashes of a successful rebellion by Anglo colonists and Tejanos against Mexico.

In November of that year, at a special joint session of Texas's Congress, the city of Houston was elected as the state capital. The Allen brothers had deliberately selected the land upon which Houston was built because it was where White Oak and Buffalo Bayous converged; the contemporary name for this place of convergence, Allen's Landing, bears the name of the brothers. Their intention was to create a town that could benefit from proximity to the Galveston waterway; their short-term goal was to have it named the capital of the new state of Texas. In their August 1836 advertisement appealing to potential settlers they noted:

Nature appears to have designated this place for the future seat of Government. It is handsome and beautifully elevated, salubrious and well-watered, and now in the very heart or centre of the population, and will be so for a length of time to come. It combines two important advantages: a communication with the coast and foreign countries, and with the different portions of the Republic. (McComb, D.G., 1969)

When the first steamship ever to visit Houston arrived in January 1837, the town totaled 12 residents and one log cabin. Four months later there were 1,500 people and 50 houses. Houston did serve as the temporary capital of the Republic of Texas, but the heat, humidity, and mosquitoes discouraged support for it becoming the permanent site of the state capitol.

When established, the charter of the city called for it to encompass nine square miles with the courthouse in the center and two aldermen to be elected from each of four wards. Eventually fifth and sixth wards were also established (McComb, 72).

From the outset, Houston was steeped in the dynamics of racism. An active slave market operated out of downtown and in the years immediately prior to the Civil War, according to the 1860 census, the number of registered slaves in the city had doubled (Jackson, 1980). In the aftermath of the Civil War, Houston became a well-integrated city for a while. An 1870 population table by McComb showing racial distribution by wards reveals that the wards had a healthy balance of African Americans and Anglos in each ward with Fifth Ward having a slight majority of African Americans. It was not until the early part of the twentieth century that Jim Crow laws were completely enacted and enforced at the neighborhood level, even though the post-Civil War era was rife with the enactment of a number of formal and informal laws and regulations that restricted access to full citizenship, economic opportunity, and mobility. Among these were separate schools for “coloreds;” separate passenger cars on trains, separate streetcars, separate waiting areas in railroad stations, a poll tax, miscegenation laws, separate libraries, separate health care facilities for the care of tuberculosis, separate bus seating, separate use of pools and water fountains, and support for the separation of races in places like movie theaters.

Houston did not attract Mexicans or Tejanos as a place to settle in the nineteenth century. In fact, the population of Mexicans shrunk before it grew. Throughout most of the nineteenth century most Mexican immigrants traveled to the Rio Grande

Valley, El Paso, and San Antonio; they did not go to east Texas cities like Houston. Anglos in east Texas had imported southern culture and racial attitudes, thus they preferred sharecroppers who were African American and Anglo. Robert R. Treviño, author of *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston*, said that the Anglos “made it clear that Mexicans were not welcome.” (2006)

According to Jesus Esparza, in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of General Santa Anna’s forces in 1836, “Texians (Anglo Texans) ordered Mexican prisoners to clean the swampland on which Houston would be built. Afterwards, most would be sent home, but many stayed, creating the starting point of early Mexican settlement in the Houston region.” (2011) Perhaps because of this auspicious beginning, unlike communities along the border or San Antonio which had a sizable and long-standing Mexican presence, Houston did not become a destination of choice for Tejanos or incoming Mexican migrants in the nineteenth century. At various points between 1850 and 1880, 6 to 18 Mexicans lived in Houston. Treviño asserts that “Mexicans were almost invisible in Houston during most of the nineteenth century.” (2006) Nestor Rodriguez, author of “Hispanic and Asian Immigration Waves in Houston,” writes that the 1880 US census showed only a “handful” of Mexicans in Houston. (2000) According to Santillan et al., that census counted fewer than ten persons of Mexican ancestry within the municipal boundaries. (2017) Esparza also notes that “Between 1836 and 1900, Mexicanos lived on the outskirts of Houston coming in to town mostly to find work.” Many worked in unskilled labor and as

food vendors. By 1900, 500–1,000 people of Mexican origin lived in Houston.

By 1900, Mexican migrants began to settle permanently within the city, occupying a region southeast of downtown called the Second Ward (Segundo Barrio), which quickly became the unofficial hub of their cultural and social life. Things were soon to change with the pull of employment opportunities catalyzed by the industrial revolution and the push of social unrest in Mexico as they inched toward civil war. In Houston, the need for laborers was particularly strong in the shipping and railroad yards. Propelled from their homes by the hardships of the Díaz modernization program and the danger and chaos of the Mexican Revolution, many *mexicanos* fled north using the railroads to travel to Texas and they gravitated toward where good jobs could be found.

Houston comes of age as a twentieth century city. The emergence of Houston as an industrial city and major urban center occurs simultaneously with the growth of the city's Mexican and larger Latino population. Unlike other major metropolitan areas in the country, comparatively few scholarly studies have been written about Houston, with even fewer focusing on the Mexican-descent population. With the exception of scholars such as Arnolde De León, Robert Treviño, Arturo Rosales, Thomas Kreneck, Tyina Steptoe, and a few others, most historians of Houston have neglected focusing on Houston's Mexican community. Most attention to the experience of Tejanos has been focused on South Texas, the borderlands of El Paso, or the city with the oldest colonial presence in Texas, San Antonio. This book seeks to complement De León and Treviño's work by offering a bottom-up perspective of a single family that I see as

relatively representative of the vast majority of this community's experiences. This book does not privilege the perspective of an exceptional politician, grassroots leader, or of an industry giant. Rather, what I seek in offering my family's story is discovery and connection, and familial idiosyncrasy and common ground, both of which express the challenge of recovering one's own past as well as demonstrating how each life matters as part of a collective.

In the early twentieth century Houston's population of Mexican descent increased due to several factors. The 1910 Mexican Revolution drove many Mexicans to Houston. Employers recruited Mexican Americans and made them into *enganchadores* (labor agents) so that they could recruit more workers; the *enganchadores* recruited Tejanos from other parts of the state and from immigrants. Mexican Americans in rural areas throughout Texas faced unemployment as commercial agriculture increased, and thus were willing to relocate to Houston since its economy was thriving. The labor shortage during World War I especially encouraged Mexicans to seek work in Houston. The increased work demands from the building of the Houston Ship Channel, the continued development of railroad infrastructure in the area, and agricultural work in areas around Houston likely had as much influence as the Mexican Revolution did in Mexicans relocating to Houston. Growth of the Mexican population was consistent. In 1920 Houston had 6,000 residents of Mexican origin. In 1930 about 15,000 residents were of Mexican origin. (The Texas Politics Project, "Population Growth in Texas, 1850–2000")

Tyina Steptoe notes in her important book that "Between 1920 and the end of the twentieth century, Houston transformed

from a town with the forty-fifth largest population in the United States into the nation's fourth largest city. In the process, Houston transitioned from a society with an Anglo and African American racial dynamic into a multiethnic/multiracial metropolis." (2016) Steptoe's work shows how multiple groups migrating to Houston in the twentieth century impacted Houston's sense of space and race. She asserts that there was not a single Black identity, just as there was not a single ethnic Mexican identity in the interactions between *Tejanos* and Mexican nationals. Steptoe argues that the "... creation of the wards in Houston affected how neighborhoods developed, and how the racial communities emerged." In the early part of the twentieth century, the era of integration was over and even though wards stopped being recognized as geopolitical units in 1905, Steptoe argues that "these districts still shaped how Houstonians made sense of the city until after WWI." (2016) Numerous policies and practices conspired to limit and influence population distribution in Houston. Everything from lending practices to educational policies to zoning regulations and transit systems began instituting limits and developing color lines that regulated where people could live. Having grown up in Denver Harbor in the '60s and '70s, a neighborhood whose boundaries were defined by railroad tracks on all four sides and cut in half by Interstate 10, it was easy to see which neighborhoods had a mixture of manufacturing industries, refineries, warehouses, landfills, and workers relative to middle and upper class inner-city and suburban communities of white-collar professionals.

Magnolia Park, an unincorporated community on the eastern edge of Houston, began to attract Mexican immigrants in the late 1910s and early 1920s as the Ship Channel developed. As

time passed, Mexicans began moving to other neighborhoods, such as the First Ward, the Sixth Ward, the Northside (then a part of the Fifth Ward), and Magnolia Park. A group of Mexican families also settled in the Houston Heights. By 1910, Houston's Mexican descent population was 2,000 (Rosales, 1981). Treviño notes that growth of the Mexican population grew steadily after the turn of the century. In 1907 a *junta patriótica* (cultural committee) launched the local Mexican Independence Day festivities. By 1908 at least one Mexican American mutual aid society had formed. (De León, 1989)

Goals and structure of the book

This book explores the interconnectedness of community, family, and the self to illustrate the interplay between place, identity, and racialization in Texas and Houston, in particular. Throughout this book, I identify the challenges associated with piecing together one family's narrative over three generations when traditional resources of family archives are limited. It will thus explore the reconstruction of a coherent historical thread through various literary and historical methods—primary and secondary sources, memory, oral histories, and creative non-fiction. In each chapter I will establish a context for the development of the city, the continuing rise of the Mexican-descent population, and the location of my family in Houston's context with as much attention as possible to specific dynamics that shaped their daily lives.

Prior to outlining the substance of each chapter, I should note the complex nature of identity for immigrant communities in an urban context. Arnaldo De León, author of *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, notes that a common feature of books by Chicana/

o urban historians has been a desire “to explain the process of institutionalized subordination.” It was also important, he states, to demonstrate “how Chicanos created constructive responses to the forces they faced. The urban setting was a place where Mexican Americans lived in a familiar surrounding and where they could both identify with the traditions of the homeland while accepting tenets of the host society on their own terms.” (1989) These dynamics were operable in Houston to be sure. Unlike other cities with a longer legacy of control and social, economic, cultural, and political power by people of Mexican descent, in Houston, ethnic Mexicans faced numerous challenges and much resistance to their efforts for individual and collective advancement. Yet, those struggles are not central to this narrative. Nor is this project invested in identifying a legacy of leaders, though there were many over the years. Rather, what I seek to do is use my family’s experiences as a gauge for how “everyday” people negotiated the complexities of their circumstances to survive and sometimes thrive.

We were a family or *norteños*. While there were certainly distinctions between us as Tejanos and the people of Northern Mexico from which we hailed, it was always clear to us that our cultural touchstone was Northern Mexico. In our preference for flour tortillas over corn tortillas, and our embrace of *canción ranchera*, *corridos*, *cumbias*, and polka we connected with our Mexican cultural traditions and extended them to our Tejano reality. Yet, as Tejanos and immigrants, our familial presence in this land did not precede the US Mexican War. With non-English speaking parents, my parents likely remained cognizant of their status as first-generation immigrants. However, despite our

almost monolingual grandparents, my siblings and I had no doubt that we were Americans of Mexican descent as well as Tejanos. Whatever experiences of racialization we had to varying degrees, they were experienced from that perspective, whether we felt marginalized, enraged, or even confused.

Chapter 1, "Fragments of the past: on family genealogy as a mosaic," will tell the story of my maternal and paternal grandparents' migration to Texas from Northern Mexico in the first quarter of the twentieth century. My grandparents were part of the migration phenomenon that occurred when Mexicans seeking to flee the violence and instability of the Mexican Revolution in the turn of the twentieth century were enticed to the United States to take advantages of the opportunities produced by the rapid growth in the railroad, shipping, agricultural, manufacturing, building, and oil industries. Initially entering the workforce as migrant farmworkers in the cotton fields of Texas or as day laborers, my grandfathers became a bricklayer and a shipyard dock worker when they settled down in Texas to raise their families. Houston is a decidedly twentieth-century Latino city. Unlike San Antonio, the Rio Grande Valley, or El Paso, Houston did not grow into an industrial town of significant size until the industrial revolution and Mexican migration both occurred.

As with many descendants of working-class migrants, archives and documentation are scant. I will draw on familial memory and secondary sources that depict the lives of working-class *mexicanos* in Houston. My grandparents eventually settled four city blocks from each other and raised large families of six and nine children. I will utilize a few family documents, like marriage licenses, birth certificates, and photographs alongside

oral histories collected from immediate and extended family members about my grandparents' life in Mexico, their transition to the USA and their maintenance, however fragile, of ties to Northern Mexico. Some part of the story will be told through creative non-fiction to fill in gaps, to dramatize certain incidents, and to try to imagine the emotions that surely must have been at play in these times of change.ⁱⁱⁱ

Chapter 2 "Becoming Americans: surviving, negotiating, and thriving under acculturation" focuses on my parents' stories. Born in the late 1920s, my parents, José Mendoza, Jr and María Concepción Martínez, were children of the Great Depression and the accompanying period of intense anti-foreigner sentiment and concomitant Americanization of that era. They grew up just a few blocks away from one another on Canal Street in Magnolia Park, one of the oldest Mexican neighborhoods of Houston. When they married in the early 1950s and moved to a nearby neighborhood, the one where I was sixth-born in 1960, they were one of the first ethnic Mexican American families in the neighborhood and the first on their block. By the time I was pre-teen, white exodus from the inner city transformed the demographics of our neighborhood so it was majority ethnic Mexican. In many respects, this was a phenomenon that characterized the transformation of the inner city and the development of the suburbs resulting from post-World War II GI Bill redlining by the banks and the housing industry. In this and many ways, I believe my family experience exemplifies that of Mexican-descent Houston. In the early 2010s, I recorded eight hours of oral history interviews with my parents about their lives. Using their story as a foundation, I wish to tell how their

story can be seen as a typical story of first-generation Mexicans in Houston. To the extent possible, even as I tell the life stories of my parents and grandparents, I want to not lose sight of the social-political-cultural context of their lives. While we did not wield political or economic power, I believe my parents modeled what we now call cultural citizenship—that is a strong and engaged connection and commitment to their community and church, which, alongside their belief in the value of education as a vehicle for social mobility, they believed was sufficient to achieve the “American Dream.” According to Renato Rosaldo:

Cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic processes. The enduring exclusions of the color line often deny full citizenship to Latinos and other people of color. From the point of view of subordinated communities, cultural citizenship offers the possibility of legitimizing demands made in the struggle to enfranchise themselves. These demands can range from legal, political, and economic issues to matters of human dignity, well-being, and respect. (1994)

Facing extreme pressure to Americanize and to not draw undue attention to themselves, like many others in working-class barrios throughout the country, my family put their heads down, worked hard, took note of who their allies and antagonists were, participated actively in neighborhood institutions, and advanced familial and personal goals as active and engaged members of their community.

Chapter 3, “Coming of age in the Space City: cowboys, astronauts, and other specters” will transition to my own coming of age memoir, not because I believe my story is exceptional, but because I believe there are many elements of my story, experiences, and relationships that are representative of untold segments of Houston and Chicano youth history in general. Vivian Gornick asserts that “... memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life, a tale that will shape experience, transform events and deliver wisdom.” (2002) This book seeks to render a story that deserves to be told.

My story will describe what it means to be one of eight children in a tight-knit extended family and an emerging inner-city barrio in which poor whites and Chicanos forged close relationships even as numerous racial tensions coexisted. My story is shaped by influences that are typical of many youths: family, neighborhood, church, school, and media, but within Chicana/Latina youth literature very few stories are written about Houston as a site of identity formation.

The Coda will lay the groundwork for a sequel to the author’s own story as he undergoes a process of political and social conscientization that is parallel to his education—both as a worker, then college student, then professor. It will review key struggles in the effort to reconstruct a family genealogy where few traditional resources exist.

