

Chicanos in Cowtown: Division

In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, Mexicans in Fort Worth carved out spaces for themselves in a city controlled at all levels by the White oligarchs.¹ Some did so as social workers employed by the Community Action Agency (CAA). Within the CAA, at the neighborhood betterment councils and community centers, these young men and women empowered themselves to improve the lives of the *Mexicanos* in the city. Although the CAA mostly focused on the economic and social issues that plagued those in poverty, both, the men and women who served on the board of the CAA and social workers on the front lines with their community, also found political outlets to engage with and push for change in Fort Worth. Many of the CAA board members and workers met through the American G.I. Forum, a Mexican American veterans' organization, but diverged into various organizations often due to conflicting strategies for civic engagement. The conflicting strategies is evident when focusing on these two groups of Mexicanos in the CAA: those on the board who were older, did not receive a formal education, but found success as business owners, and those who were younger, identified as Chicanos, college educated, and chose careers with non-profit organizations.² Just as in other major cities, activists struggled to come together toward a common goal. Although Fort Worth's CAA benefited from the passion and methods of young Chicano and Chicana activists, their elders' desires for inclusion into the respectable mainstream political world of the city often hindered their efforts. The dominance of the more conservative, older leaders preserved a city ruled by White, wealthy men whose chosen Mexican American leaders fell in line and made only small waves, and ultimately did not challenge the status quo.

Established under President Johnson's War on Poverty in 1964, the CAA began in Fort Worth in 1965 and created neighborhood centers in high poverty areas, initiated a household

management aid program for poor families, and provided access to Planned Parenthood services.³ The funding was flexible and managed locally by the CAA board. Manual Jara, co-owner of Butler-Jara Printing Company, served as its first chairman from 1965 to 1967 and elected as secretary-treasurer of the organization after his term as chairman. Ben Cardenas, Gilbert Garcia, Juanita Zepeda (appears on lists and in newspaper articles as Mrs. J.P. Zepeda), all who had engaged in Fort Worth activism on behalf of Mexicans since the 1950s, also served on the board and in executive positions at different times.⁴ College students, Joe Marquez, Eddy Herrera, Vincent Vasquez, and Ray Valdez who received social worker training and studied the organizing principles of Saul Alinsky, worked at the community centers and in other institutions that aimed to fight Johnson's War on Poverty.⁵

The CAA board applied for funds for specific programs they believed were necessary for eliminating poverty and the social workers at the community centers implemented those programs. However, considering the personal success of the board members, they did not see issues of poverty as anything beyond economic in nature that could be overcome with hard work and some public assistance. Whereas, the social workers believed much of the problems facing Mexicans in Fort Worth stemmed from continued discrimination. While working for the Texas Employment Commission (TEC), a War on Poverty program, Eddy Herrera witnessed the discrimination that existed regarding job opportunities and housing. Part of his duties at the TEC were to help find employment and housing for Mexican Americans. Herrera stated, "We had several experiences where the landlord refused to rent to a Mexican-American. One time I called a place on the North Side, and the lady said for us to come on down. But when I walked up to the door with the couple, the landlady said, 'We just rented it.'"⁶ Suspicious of the encounter, Herrera asked a friend to call the same landlady and inquire about the lease. She told his friend

that it was available. CAA social workers understood that new, federally-funded programs could not alone change these issues for Mexicans in Fort Worth.

In the summer of 1970, when Lake Worth Police beat and arrested sixteen Mexican American wedding guests, tensions between different cohorts of activists became plain. On the night of June 6, 1970, a Mexican wedding at the National Hall in Lake Worth, just outside the North Side Fort Worth neighborhood, two men got in an argument and, when asked to leave, in a physical altercation outside. Even though the wedding guests had the situation under control, the White owners of the hall called police, the arrival of which led to enough commotion that people inside the wedding began moving outside. According to two of the spectators arrested, Pablo Ramon and Julian Guajardo, the police officers, without provocation, aggressively grabbed, handcuffed, and pushed them into crowded police cars. After the officer clubbed Ramon and broke his skin while tightening the handcuffs on his wrists, Ramon asked the police officer the reason for the arrest, the officer replied, "Shut up Mexican and get in the car."⁷ Ramon added that the police officer beckoned wedding goers to come outside the hall then seemed to enjoy himself as he then arrested each one. Even after warnings from the crowd of Guajardo's, a former prisoner of war in WWII, had an injured right arm, a police officer manhandled him, using profanity pushed him into an already full police car. Although the charges were dropped, a group of victims organized the "Mexican American Concerned Citizens," retained a lawyer, and demanded an investigation into the actions of the Lake Worth Police Department. A grand jury investigated and not only cleared the policy officers of any wrongdoing but also praised their actions in dealing with the disruptive crowd of Mexicans. Only four of the sixty witnesses who supported the testimony of the wedding guests were allowed to testify, the Mexican American

Concerned Citizens group labeled the grand jury report a “whitewash” and increased the “mistrust between the Mexican community and the established legal process.”⁸

Several of the CAA social workers wanted to protest the actions of law enforcement rather than attempting to find a resolution via the judiciary. However, they were encouraged to stand down by their elders. Joe Marquez, Ray Valdez, Vincent Vasquez, and Eddy Herrera who had already established the United Civic Council (UCC), a new organization that could react with the level of passion they believed necessary to create change in their communities, began writing their own newsletter, *El Chicano* after the police incident to “give Mexican-Americans a true picture of social and economic problems.”⁹ The members of UCC were tired of Gilbert Garcia and the American G.I. Forum’s assimilationist philosophies and believed these passive strategies were no longer sufficient and did not provide solutions to the social problems in Fort Worth. Although, Jara did not publicly approve of the rhetoric of the Chicanos and as Marquez stated, “were inclined to believe whatever ‘whitey’ said than what the activists said . . . and did not want to lose their business to the ‘white’ guys,” Marquez remembers that Jara printed *El Chicano* for UCC behind closed doors.¹⁰ Jara may have appreciated the attention the Chicanos brought to the issues facing Mexicanos in the city but wanted to maintain a respectable, mainstream persona to ensure his continued inclusion among White city leaders.

The scope of the social problems that the CAA workers confronted was evident in a July 1970 special edition of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* that investigated the conditions of the Mexican American community in Fort Worth. The newspaper’s interest in the plight of Mexican Americans in Fort Worth is evident of both the gains made by older activists led by Gilbert Garcia in the twenty five years since the end of the World War II and the attention the younger Chicano activists brought to the continued inequalities in the lives of Mexicans in the Fort

Worth. On the one hand, it is remarkable that the newspaper commissioned the piece at all. On the other hand, they gave the assignment to six White interns on summer vacation from various universities across Texas and the Midwest. The White interns initially attempted to knock on doors in barrios throughout Fort Worth on their own and found residents unwilling to speak freely. They expressed an inability to speak English or just told the interns there were no problems or discrimination issues. The young journalists then recruited several Mexican social workers from the CAA to accompany them. This time the residents were open to answering questions. The final analysis of the problems facing the Mexican American community in Fort Worth, according to these interns, was “related to their own culture”, and their “family ties to tradition and poverty.”¹¹ The interns’ stereotypical view of Mexican families and their problems is also evident in the illustration for the front cover, a Mexican man and woman with six young children. The *Star-Telegram* also reported that a new and younger generation of Mexicans, who “have adopted the name Chicanos” were now making noise and demanding equal rights.¹²

The two generations of Mexicanos in Fort Worth openly expressed their conflicting opinions of the special edition in the week following the publication. At a meeting of the North Side Betterment Council of the CAA, the day following the *Star-Telegram*’s publication of the special edition, Ben Cardenas expressed his desire “to be called by my name or called a Mexican and an American.” Cardenas believed the use of “chicano” is slang and did not define him.¹³ J.P. Zepeda expressed his frustration with the young and “immature” journalists’ chosen interviewees. Zepeda stated, “There are at least 40 people who have been successful in business. They are the ones who should have been contacted, not some social workers.”¹⁴ At a meeting of the Worth Heights Barrio Betterment Council of the CAA in the south side of Fort Worth, social

workers praised the article and stated that, “perhaps those who expressed displeasure about the section were unhappy because they were not interviewed.”¹⁵

Great disparities continued to exist within the Mexican community between those who found success and those whose lives persisted in poverty. Though rumors abounded about using a more confrontational form of activism with the new wave of civic engagement in Fort Worth, the strategies and methods of the former generation of activists prevailed resulting in limited change or an illusion of change.¹⁶ Even though the CAA social workers, Joe Marquez, Eddy Herrera fashioned themselves in their red *chalecas* that said UCC on the back and were impassioned to improve the lives of Mexicans living in the barrios they did not have the clout to upend the White oligarchy of the city. Manual Jara, Gilbert Garcia, and the other men and women who served on the board of the CAA fought their way to achieve the success they had. They too wanted change but had to balance the progress they already made and the acceptance they received with the needs of their fellow Mexicans in the city. Nevertheless, Fort Worth Mexicanos today should remember and honor all of those who devoted their time and effort to ensuring city leadership did not completely ignore these needs.

¹ I employ *Mexican American* and sometimes *Mexican* or *Mexicanos* interchangeably for stylistic purposes to describe individuals of Mexican ancestry both those having U.S. citizenship through birth or naturalization and recent immigrants. The term Chicano and Chicana refers to the men and women who adopted the ideology of the Chicano movement that identified more with their ancestral heritage rather than American ideals. The term *White* is used to identify the dominant group in American society who have historically benefited from racial and social privileges. I have also chosen to capitalize all of these terms signifying their status as a distinct racial group. For

more on the White oligarchy of Fort Worth see Kate Sherrod, "Who Runs Fort Worth," *D Magazine*, November 1995, <https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/1995/november/power-who-runs-fort-worth/>.

² For more about this divide between Mexican American activism see, Carlos Kevin Blanton, *George I. Sánchez: The Long Fight for Mexican American Integration*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans Leadership, Ideology & Identity, 1930-1960.*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³ For more on the CAA in Fort Worth see Cecilia Hill, "Chicanos in Cowtown: The Establishment of the Greater Tarrant County Community Action Agency," in this series of essays.

⁴ "Greater Fort Worth Tarrant County Action Agency," Community Services Administration – Southwest Region, Records Relating to City Economic Boards, 1965-1968, Fort Worth, Box 9, General Correspondence, Jan.-June 1968 Folder, National Archives Records Administration, Fort Worth, TX; much of their earlier activism included efforts to increase the number of registered and active Mexican voters in the city and organization of Viva Kennedy Clubs.

⁵ Joe Marquez interview by author, July 17, 2019. Saul Alinsky wrote *Reveille for Radicals* in 1946.

⁶ Joanna Slavin, "Chicanos tackle problems," *Fort Worth Press*, August 7, 1969, found in Samuel Garcia Papers, Series VII: Clippings-Hispanic Community Organizations, Box 10, Folder 1.

⁷ Bob-Ray Sanders, "Pair in Lake Worth Fracas Say No Charges Told," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 13, 1970.

⁸ Dave Keltner and Tim Kidd, "Spanish Speakers Find 'Police Blue' Real Color of Law," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 26, 1970, 4-G.

⁹ Jorjanna Price, "La Raza May Be Bridge for Old, New," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 26, 1970.

¹⁰ Joe Marquez interview by author, July 17, 2019.

¹¹ Jorjanna Price, "La Raza May Be Bridge for Old, New," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 26, 1970.

¹² Jorjanna Price, "La Raza May Be Bridge for Old, New," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 26, 1970.

¹³ Jim Vachule, "S-T Supplement Assailed At Meeting of CAA," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 28, 1970.

¹⁴ Jim Vachule, "S-T Supplement Assailed At Meeting of CAA," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 28, 1970.

¹⁵ "S-T Supplement Receives Praise," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 30, 1970.

¹⁶ For a further discussion of token leadership see, Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).