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## "Yes, we are Latino women but very proud to have serve[d] our country": Ethnic Mexican women's contributions to World War II

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“YES, WE ARE LATINO WOMEN BUT VERY PROUD TO HAVE  
SERVE[D] OUR COUNTRY”: ETHNIC MEXICAN WOMEN’S  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO WORLD WAR II

A Thesis

by

LAURA L. OVIEDO

Submitted to the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2014



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## ABSTRACT

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This theses highlights ethnic Mexican women from Texas who contributed to World War II through the military, wartime employment industries, and home front unconventional efforts. By utilizing twenty-eight oral histories, collected from the VOCES Oral History Project Archive at the Benson Latin American Collection, ten Texas newspapers, and military documents, this research presents the wartime efforts of ethnic Mexican women. Each chapter traces the women’s economic, racial, and gendered struggles in their private and social spaces before the war to better appreciate their participation during the war. An examination of the experiences of ethnic Mexican women during World War II analyzes the agency they enacted to accept, resist, and negotiate their positions within a patriarchal structure in their social and private spaces. World War II provided a moment for ethnic Mexican women to break from strict gender roles, challenge racial barriers, and gain economic autonomy.





## DEDICATION

My thesis is dedicated to *Papi* and *Mami*, who did not have the opportunity to receive the education they always wanted and economically struggled, but worked day in and day out to provide for my brothers and I. Thank you for teaching me the value of hard work. I dedicate to both of you, the fruits of my labor, my thesis.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Michael Faubion and Dr. Amy Hay, for their continued support since my undergraduate years, and for your patience, contributions, and commitment to my thesis. I want to recognize and thank Dr. Sonia Hernandez, my thesis committee chair, who served as a great mentor and amazing role model. Dr. Hernandez is the first Chicana historian I discovered and through my graduate years, have grown to admire as a scholar, a mentor, and a strong Mexican American woman from the Rio Grande Valley. Her words of encouragement have been a motivating factor, and ultimately, have made me believe I, too, can succeed in academia. *Muchisimas Gracias*.

I would also like to thank my mentors from Mexican American Studies Program: Dr. Sonia Hernandez, Dr. Stephanie Alvarez, Dr. Marci McMahon, and Dr. Emmy Perez. I am beyond grateful to be empowered, mentored, and supported by such intelligent, fierce, and strong-willed *mujeres* who embody the type of scholar, activist, and woman I hope to be one day. My thanks to my History graduate colleagues, the Mexican American Studies Club, and W.A.K.E-U.P! for making my graduate years memorable. A special thanks to *mi hermano*, Ruben Garza, for his continued support and belief in me.

I am eternally grateful to my parents, my Grandma Esther, and Tia Jess for their continued support in everything I do. Thank you for believing in me! To the love of my life, Christian Ramirez, thank you for your patience, sticking by me, and supporting me through this process; I know it has not been easy. I love you. Siempre.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

My research began as a project to examine the lives of Mexican Americans from the Rio Grande Valley from World War Two through Vietnam, with a focus on their participation in the military. As I began to conduct archival research, I found an abundance of newspaper clippings, oral histories, and recorded listings of military veterans from different areas of the Rio Grande Valley. I thought I hit the jackpot on my research until I discovered that ninety five percent of the primary documents that I obtained were on Mexican American males. I did not have much on Mexican American women. What seemed the simplest of answers now turned into larger historical questions: Did they contribute to the war? Were they able to participate in different sectors of the war effort as their white female counterparts were able to? Were these Mexican American women allowed to serve in the military? The most crucial question began to drive my desire to know more... Where were their histories documented?

The lack of primary sources on Mexican American women during World War II limit the research and histories available on these women. As Chicanos and Chicanas began a movement to recover and document the histories of their indigenous roots to their contributions to the American narrative, the histories and lived experiences of Mexican American women remained ignored and depreciated. The phrase “two times a minority” can be used to describe the position that ethnic Mexican women have in American, Women, and Chicano historiography. US histories have traditionally been Eurocentric-male dominated, reflective of the historians

recording it. As a consequence of the gendered production of history, women's stories were rejected. When (White) women finally began writing their own histories, their perspectives and experiences were presumed to be homogenous to women of color, who dealt and coped with life in their own unique ways.

During the 1970s, Chicanos began documenting their own histories, with some even appearing as early as 1949, with Carey McWilliams' *North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*.<sup>1</sup> The literature expanded giving a voice to Mexican Americans whose past was largely ignored. However, within Chicano historiography, the lack of gendered historical production reflected the structure that Eurocentric and male centric historians were utilizing. As Chicanos decolonized their histories, they colonized the history *de las mujeres*. Consequently, Chicanos, such as Rodolfo Acuna in *Occupied America*, revised their previous works to include women's participation.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, scholars such as Emilio Zamora, Richard Santillan, and Zaragosa Vargas, among others, have acknowledged and included the role of women in their own research. In respect to their efforts and research, the information of women is still limited. In the literature review, these discrepancies are evident except in the growing histories written by Chicana historians themselves. Thanks to Chicana historians such as Emma Pérez, Vicki Ruiz, Antonio Castañeda, Sonia Hernández, Elizabeth Escobedo, Cynthia Orozco,

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<sup>1</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Contributions in American History*, new ed., vol. 140, *North from Mexico: the Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). First published in 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2011) 30. For a brief depiction of Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) controversy. "In earlier versions of Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America*, which has served as the standard (textbook) historical narrative of Chicano Studies, the section "A Challenge to Male Domination" was located "historically" (linearly) in the Hispanic (read: sold out) 1980s chapter. Adding on feminism after the movement reflects the politics of periodization, a historiographic device that denies Chicanas or women of color historical agency in social transformation by consistently depicting their role or importance as occurring after the "real revolution" or period of social change. Fortunately, Acuña's later editions include a much wider spectrum of women's involvement in the Chicano movement, reflecting a deepening awareness of the importance of women and a shift in the field of Chicana and Chicano Studies." Also mentioned is Carlos Muñoz Jr.'s *Youth, Identity, Power* (London: Verso, 1989).

and Maylei Blackwell, just to name a few, the histories of Mexican American women has become a growing field of its own.

The most recent attempts to recover the history of Mexican Americans during World War II has currently been led by journalist and professor at the University of Texas at Austin, Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez. This extensive collaboration has produced a ground breaking study on the participation of Latinos in World War II. One of the largest and prominent studies of Mexican American contributions to World War II is incorporated in the U.S. Latino and Latina Oral History Project, *Stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas of the World War II Generation*. It has transcribed and printed valuable oral interviews from the World War II generation of Latinas and Latinos that contributed to the war effort in the military, at home, overseas, in the civil service, and wartime labor employment industries. Although it views the efforts of the Latinas and Latinos as a whole, this can definitely be used for research explicitly on Mexican American women and their lived experiences. A major problem commonly encountered when researching on Latinos, particularly in the military, is their racial classification as “White,” evident in military records. It not only complicates the ability to distinguish them, but it becomes more difficult when cross cultural marriages are involved. Moreover, an intense examination needs to be done to figure out this complex research topic.

Even with scarce documentation of Mexican American military contributions to the World War II, most of the scholarly attention is focused on men. Historians who have contributed research in this area, nonetheless, have produced foundational studies in this area of study. Whether it is in a short article or mentioned in a survey about Mexican American history, their contributions are continually overlooked. Additionally, Mexican American women who

devoted their energy to wartime tasks have persistently been excluded from histories of World War II.

In Rivas-Rodríguez's *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latino and Latinas of the World War II Generation*, a modest seven pages is reserved for the section for Latinas who served in the armed forces during the war, compared to the 175 pages dedicated to the men. Rivas-Rodríguez provides brief overviews of the WACs and WAVES, however the other women's military units were not mentioned. Not only are the other units disregarded, but the overall percentage of the Latinas who comprised 350,000 of the total women who served in the military was not addressed. The interviews, while important to the reconstruction of history, provided limited information, giving the reader just a peek into what womens' experiences were actually like, leaving many unanswered questions.<sup>3</sup>

Like Rivas- Rodríguez's book other studies do not mention the statistics of Mexican American women who served during World War II. Some Chicana historians have not included this information in their own studies dealing directly with the history of Mexican American women. Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten's *Las Tejanas 300 Years of History*, did not mention the number of Tejanas who served in the military in their distinguished survey of Mexican American women in Texas history. When it comes to women who served in uniform, they only provide information on five women who participated in war-time employment. The only one they distinguished as a Navy nurse was a certain Miss. Placencia, who is displayed through a 1941 photo as she became the first Mexican American Navy Nurse to be commissioned.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas of the WWII Generation* (Austin: U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project, 2006), 1-374.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten, *Jack and Doris Smothers Series in Texas History, Life, and Culture*, vol. 10, *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 1-456.

Historian Vicki Ruiz's *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in the Twentieth Century America* serves as the first full length study of Mexican-origin women in America. As she examines the experiences of Mexican women throughout the US narrative, Ruiz coins the term and theory of "cultural coalescence" as she describes that "immigrants and their children pick, borrow, retain, and create distinctive cultural forms."<sup>5</sup> Her groundbreaking work in Mexican women's history has mapped out a theoretical framework in which emerging Chicana historians and labor historians have sought to follow in their own research. It would have been interesting to read Ruiz's thoughts on women claiming identity in the public space through their participation in military service.

In *A Wasp Among Eagles: A Military Test Pilot in WWII*, Ann B. Carl gives a nuanced description in the military pay, WASP requirements, and living conditions in the military. Once more, this author and first person account of a servicewoman during WWII, describes race relations within the military. Similarly, while Jean Cole's *Women Pilots of World War II* is not a biographical account, it presents different stories and pictures by different pilots. However, Mexican American women or any interactions with them, is missing.<sup>6</sup>

In *Women in the Line of Fire: What You Should Know About Women in the Military*, Erin Solaro covers the expanding roles of women in the military throughout the twentieth century by arguing about the necessary changes that should take place to allow women to serve in full military combat in today's armed forces. She emphasized the devaluation of servicewomen throughout America's wars, dating back to the American Revolution. Although her study was to

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<sup>5</sup> Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America*. (Oxford University Press, 1998) xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Ann Carl, *A Wasp Among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 1-132.; Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995, 1992), 1-188.

address the WWII era, she only sporadically mentioned women's conditions to this watershed war and did so only when emphasizing the subordination of women. Once again, race in the military is explained in black and white terms when discussing segregation between Blacks and Whites during WWII. Solaro's main argument is that the reason women's roles in the military have been suppressed since WWII was due to the issue of gender.<sup>7</sup>

Two other authors who fall in the same category as Solaro are veterans Evelyn M. Monohon and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, who co-authored *A Few Good Women: American Military Women from World War I to the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*. Their book presents a historical overview of women's participation in all units, with detailed accounts of each. It is also one of the only books to mention race in the military focusing on Chinese, African Americans, and Japanese women, but left Mexican Americans out.<sup>8</sup>

This issue of only distinguishing race between Black and White in the women's service units is also evident in a combat veteran's book *War and American Women: Heroism, Deeds, and Controversy*. WWII veteran and military historian, William B. Bruer, dedicated six chapters to women who served during World War II. Just as Solaro, he made the distinction between Black service women and White women in half a page. To his credit, he explained the military process of including women in the military.<sup>9</sup>

Rivas-Rodríguez's work, *A Legacy Greater Than Words*, included a larger proportion of women who served on the home front during World War II. Her focus was on wartime employment industries in Texas, with a heavy reliance of data on military bases and defense

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<sup>7</sup> Erin Solaro, *Women in the Line of Fire: What You Should Know About Women in the Military* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 1-416.

<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, *A Few Good Women: America's Military Women from World War I to the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 1-496.

<sup>9</sup> William B. Bruer, *War and American Women: Heroism, Deeds, and Controversy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 1-280.

manufacturing industries. Although she does not include quantitative data on the number of Latinas in the workforce, she included women who worked in the Civil Service, War Department, and manufacturing companies. Acosta and Winegarten also add certain data and examples of Mexican American women in Texas doing their part in the war effort. They give brief illustrations of different Mexican American who worked in the railroad industries, left their farms and took up local business, and others who left the comfort of their homes to work in munition and defense factories. In a brief paragraph, Acosta and Winegarten mention the involvement of Mexican American women in the civil rights organizations and important conferences during World War II. They mention their continued activism in organizations such as the U.S. Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) and its Spanish Speaking People Division.<sup>10</sup>

In discussing the history of Mexican Americans and civic organizations, Cynthia E. Orozco's *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*<sup>99</sup> examines the role of women in the League of United Latin American Citizens in the 1930s. She dedicates a whole chapter in not just their participation but their own view of their involvement. Another major civic organization that resulted as a part of WWII was the G.I. Forum, which included women's auxiliaries. Michelle Kells' study, *Hector P. García: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights*, does not highlight the women who contributed to the G.I. Forum, while Henry A.J. Ramos' *The American G.I. Forum* includes a significant data on women's contributions to their struggles and efforts in the cause.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rivas-Rodriguez, *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas of the WWII Generation*, 1-374.

<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 1-330.; Michelle Hall Kells, *Héctor P. García: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 1-328.; Henry A. J. Ramos, *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* (Houston, Tex.: Arte Público Press, 1998), 1-224.

Historians and scholars tend to focus their research on the home front when examining World War II. Their wartime contributions are brought to light through wartime labor employment industries, not through their military service. Through the histories of their labor, scholars have been able to reveal the cultural aspects that Mexican American women combated during the war period. An examination of Mexican American women during a transition period such as World War II through 1950 reveal the implications it had on the personal experiences of these women.

Emilio Zamora's *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas* deals precisely with ethnic Mexicans during the World War II era in Texas. More specifically, he examines the employment, economic, political, race relations, and social relations dealt by the Mexican-American working population. Zamora's analysis of the economic and political landscape of the Mexican American experience during World War II is groundbreaking. While Zamora focuses on relations between Texas and Mexico through prominent political organizations, in *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth Century America* Zaragosa Vargas argues the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) became the leading civil rights vehicle for Mexican American workers who faced in immeasurable amount of workplace and social discrimination by Anglo Americans throughout the 1930 through the 1950s. In this study, he also included statistics on Mexican American women who engaged in defense work with the absence of their loved ones. An in-depth examination of women in the workplace, in Zamora's study, would have certainly made the book more inclusive with regards to wartime employment industries and their relationship with women workers. Vargas is one of the few to posit that



Mexican American women made up 40% of wartime laborers working in defense plants in the region of the Midwest.<sup>12</sup>

Expanding on Zamora and Vargas' study on women in the workplace, Naomi Quiñonez's *Rosita the Riveter: Welding Tradition with Wartime Transformations* and Penny Colman's *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in World War II* both examine women employed through the wartime industrial fervor and the conditions they had to face. In her essay, Naomi Quiñonez provides a history of Mexican American women who took up jobs in the defense industry. As she provides information on the contributions made by Mexican American women in wartime labor she "explores the social and economic pressures, opportunities, and limitations that expanded the contours of culture, gender relationships, and self-perceptions of many Mexican American women of this period." Using a different method of analysis, Colman provides a comprehensive examination of women's efforts on the home front by examining the image of Rosie the Riveter. Using a vast amount of interviews and pictures, Colman is able to not just provide a definitive history, but she turns the historical analysis into a more personal in depth look at the experiences of the women who lived through this era.<sup>13</sup>

Colman and Quiñonez describe the different discriminatory and sexist conditions and practices women endured in the workplace. The women were not only paid less, but their training and skills were less invested in and devalued by their male counterparts. One aspect that Quiñonez does not cover but Colman does, is the conditions of the Great Depression and how it

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<sup>12</sup> Emilio Zamora, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics During World War II* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2009), 1-33; Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008, 2005), 1-400.

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Quiñonez, "Rosita the Riveter: Welding Tradition with Wartime Transformations," in *Mexican Americans and World War II*, ed. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Penny Colman, *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working On the Home Front in World War II* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 1-113.

affected the working opportunities for women. Colman states that the Great Depression enforced barriers that created prejudiced opinions about women in the workplace, which may have contributed to some attitudes in the prewar poll statistics pointed out by Quiñonez. Colman adds how the restrictions placed on women after the onset of the war had practically diminished the laws limiting women's roles in the work place, which may have contributed to the changing attitudes to the latter results of the polls. Additionally, Quiñonez proves how the wartime opportunities, even if they were subjected to degrading and deplorable conditions, created a sense of autonomy for the women and their families. This newfound independence was a breakthrough from their socially and culturally constructed gender roles that repressed their individuality and identity before the war.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike Quiñonez's evident examination of Mexican American women workers, Colman does not make racial/ethnic distinctions between Anglo women and Mexican American women. Colman does include the oral histories and experiences of women with Spanish surnames, who are more than likely ethnic Mexicans or Latinas, however, the crucial question to ask is whether Colman lumps Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans under the same category of Caucasian Americans. She does not address this issue throughout the book which presents challenges to the researchers and makes it difficult to distinguish between Latinas and other women. In contrast to Colman's lack of racial/ethnic identification, Sherna Gluck's *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* brings a unique representation of Latinas who worked in defense industries on the home front. By providing oral histories of women of color with that of

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<sup>14</sup> Naomi Quiñonez, "Rosita the Riveter: Welding Tradition with Wartime Transformations,"; Penny Colman, *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working On the Home Front in World War II*, 1-113.

Whites, she is able to give a well-rounded portrayal of each women, including Mexican American women.<sup>15</sup>

Recent explorations on Mexican American women's experience during World War II include studies by Catherine Ramirez, Elizabeth Escobedo, and Patricia Portales. They all provide innovative analysis on the social and cultural aspect of the lives of Mexican American women during World War II. They offer a fresh interpretation of the Zoot Suit style, which has traditionally been reserved as a tool of analysis for their male counterparts. Ramirez's *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* provides a long trajectory of the Zoot Suit style from World War II through the Chicana/o movement in which she studies the style and symbolism of the Pachuca's dress to challenge their culturally constructed identities through music, art, dress, and language.<sup>16</sup> Through a gendered lens, Ramirez's in-depth examination asserts that women used the culture of the Zoot Suit as a political statement and agency of resistance. Similarly, Portales' *Women, Bombs, and War* provides a personal examination of World War II labor based on her aunt who worked in a defense industry during the war. She not only studies the style of the Pachucas in particular, but she addresses the language and labor used by Mexican American women to assert their space. Like Ramirez, Portales argues that women utilized their Spanish language in the workplace to claim their space and resist oppressive conditions. However, unlike Ramirez, Portales utilizes film and theatre to argue that "Mexican American women used language, dress, and industrial skills to facilitate social and economic mobility."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Naomi Quiñonez, "Rosita the Riveter: Welding Tradition with Wartime Transformations,"; Penny Colman, *Rosie the Riveter: Women Working On the Home Front in World War II*, 1-113. Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1988), 1-227

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Sue Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1-256.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Portales, "Women, Bombs, and War: Remapping Mexican American Women's Home Front Agency in World War II Literature, Theater, and Film" (PhD diss., The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2012), 1-152.

Published in March of 2013, Elizabeth R. Escobedo's *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Homefront* is the latest full length study of Mexican American women during World War II. She examines the women in the war employment industries, volunteer war organizations, and their personal/cultural lives to argue that although they were still culturally constrained, they utilized the war to come into their own. Although it contributes magnificently to the growing literature of Mexican American women during the war, it respectfully continues to lack information on the role of women in the military.<sup>18</sup>

The literature on wartime workforce by the Mexican American women indicates a shortage of historical research in this field. This economic element is not only crucial to women's history but to Mexican American women's history because it further helps to analyze the contributions to wartime production, but it also demonstrates the economic support they provided for their families. Whether it was to supplement their own financial needs or feed their families while the men were away at war, Mexican American women took up roles that were previously designated to men.

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the experiences of ethnic Mexican women before and during World War II, ultimately leading them to enact agency of resistance, accommodation, and negotiation through their contributions to the war effort. Every chapter will utilize oral histories of ethnic Mexican women collected from the VOCES Oral History Project Archive at the Benson Latin American Collection. Newspaper articles, military records, and oral histories are employed to highlight ethnic Mexican women's contributions to the war in the military, wartime employment industries, and home front voluntary actions. In order to

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Rachel Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women On the World War II Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 1-240.

contextualize their agency of resistance, negotiation, and accommodation during the war, their family's histories will be shared at the beginning of every chapter. Their histories will show the economic, racial, and gendered barriers they encountered before the war. By incorporating their prewar histories, we can better understand and appreciate these women's participation to the war effort.

“Ethnic Mexican Women and Labor in Texas Leading Up To World War II” provides a history of the ethnic Mexican labor force with excerpts of ethnic Mexican women's oral histories to provide voice to the historical narrative. By discussing the prewar economic conditions of women, it will underscore the opportunities World War II granted to women, particularly ethnic Mexican women sharing their stories. A history of the economic and employment atmosphere of Texas before the war will then shift to the narratives of ethnic Mexican women in “Keep'Em Flying!” The war granted ethnic Mexican women an opportunity to step out of their domestic roles and attain higher paying employment. Through their employment, they were able to break racial and gendered barriers while gaining economic autonomy.

The participation of ethnic Mexican women in the military- in “I'm not asking my country for more than they can give me, I give to my country what I can,” will demonstrate the gendered norms and expectations they resisted, negotiated, and accommodated to enlist and enter a masculine institution. Oral histories are used to give an in-depth analysis of the women's experiences within the male dominated arena and present the wartime opportunities of travel, cultural exposure, and unchaperoned courting. “Everyone Pitched In” will bring to light the unconventional efforts contributed by the women in the home front which include writing letters, collecting tins and metals, entertaining soldiers, among more. Their testimonies will show how

they enacted agency within their private and social lives to contest racial, gendered, and patriarchal restrictions.

This thesis examines the lives of ethnic Mexican women during World War II in Texas, and argues that ethnic Mexican women used their participation in the different divisions of the war effort to step out of their culturally constructed gender roles. I examine women's roles in the military, wartime labor employment industries, and home front war efforts as a means to demonstrate their contributions. They employed strategies of resistance, negotiation, and accommodation while demonstrating agency by creating their own space outside their domestic/culturally imposed roles. The collective stories of ethnic Mexican women do not only highlight their experiences and participation to World War II, but they demonstrate their agency and bypassing of racial, gendered, and patriarchal norms. Their history will no longer be ignored.

This thesis will expand the growing histories of ethnic Mexican women in the Chicana/Chicano historiography, Texas history, Women's history, and the American historical narrative. It is my hope that we recover the voice of women who have been silenced and recognize their labor, memory, and honor. As Chicana historian, Emma Perez, states:

And what we know, what we discover as we venture into other worlds, is that we can only repeat the voices previously unheard, rebuffed, or underestimated as we attempt to redeem that which has been disregarded in our history. Voices of women from the past, voices of Chicanas, Mexicanas, and Indias, are utterances which are still minimized, spurned even scorned. And time, in all its dialectical invention and promise, its so-called inherent progress, has not granted Chicanas, Mexicanas, Indias much voice at all. We are spoken about, spoken for, and ultimately encoded as whining, hysterical, irrational, or passive women who cannot know what is good for us, who cannot know how to express or authorize our own narratives. But we will. And we do.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Emma Pérez. *The Delocolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) XV.

## CHAPTER II

### ETHNIC MEXICAN WOMEN AND LABOR IN TEXAS LEADING UP TO WORLD WAR II

Women made significant strides in the wartime workforce and their numbers significantly increased over the course of the war. This allowed them to step out of their prewar social, economic, and employment spaces. Although this was an achievement for all women, women of color faced greater challenges than their Anglo counterparts. This not only presented them an opportunity to step out of their domestic sphere, but it placed them in unfamiliar racial and gendered spaces. Particularly for ethnic Mexican women, higher wages meant not only a push up the economic ladder but earned them independence that most had never experienced before the war. The wartime experiences of eight ethnic Mexican women, which include Julia Aguillon, Delfina Baladez, Aurora Gonzalez, Elena Guerra, Josephine Ledesma Walker, Ester Perez, Maria Thomas, and Wilhemina Vasquez, will be highlighted throughout this chapter and reveal the social, personal, and economic advancements they made despite their struggles with racial, gendered, and patriarchal constraints. The inclusion of these women's family stories are highlighted to better understand these *mujeres'* history and their social roles before the war, and how these shaped their wartime ideology, actions, and experiences. Their stories of prewar economic struggles, racial and gender discrimination, education, and courtship reveal how women took advantage of wartime employment opportunities despite the gender, race, class and

regional boundaries. In turn, these women gained social and cultural independence and awareness during World War II.

### **The Great Depression**

Julia Aguillon and Elena Guerra's families moved to Texas from Mexico. Shortly after their family's relocations, Julia and Elena were born in 1917. Unfortunately, Elena's relocation was due to a crucial safety concern; her father was seeking political asylum in the United States for aiding US troops with the occupation of Veracruz. Sisters Delfina Baladez and Wilhemina Vasquez, migrated from Mexico, but not until 1926. Delfina was born in Veracruz in 1924 and spent the first two years of her life in Mexico, until her father, a Dutch immigrant, settled the family in a German settlement in McAllen, Texas. Her younger sibling, Wilhemina, named after a Dutch queen, was born soon after their settlement in 1926. Due to the father's return to Mexico, the family relocated to San Antonio where her mother became the family's breadwinner.<sup>1</sup> Like Delfina, Maria Thomas was born in Veracruz, one year earlier in March 1923. The other three women were born in Texas: Josephine Ledesma was born in Kyle in 1918, Ester Perez in Needville in 1920, and Aurora Gonzalez was born in San Antonio the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 1925.

Elena Guerra, San Antonio native, worked as a defense worker during World War II. During the Mexican Revolution, many Mexican families were forced to relocate for economic and security reasons, including Elena's family, who moved to McAllen. Elena's father, a Mexican Port Authority worker, aided the US military during the Occupation of Veracruz of 1914. His involvement earned him the label of a traitor to his native country leaving him no

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, letter to Lynn Walker, 17 May 2006, Folder 488, VOCES Oral History Project Archive (hereinafter cited as VOCES OHPA), Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.



choice but to seek asylum in the United States. “[He came over because] there was a lot of unrest at the time and he looked at this country as a very peaceful country... once he came here he was overjoyed to see how it was compared to Mexico.”<sup>2</sup> Their family settled in San Antonio, Texas, where Elena was born a few years later. Her father’s involvement with the Occupation of Veracruz had repercussions on Elena’s childhood and early adulthood upbringing. For the rest of his life, her father lived with the fear of his family’s safety, limiting her travel and education opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

To escape the political economic turmoil of their country, Mexicans travelled north of the border for opportunity and new beginnings. As a child of Mexican and Dutch immigrant parents, Delfina and Wilhemina stated they migrated from Mexico so “they could have a better education, a better life.”<sup>4</sup> Some came from low economic backgrounds, while others were financially stable. But no matter what their economic status or situation was in their native country, most immigrants’ financial security did not carry over to their new country. When Delfina and Wilhemina’s family were forced to relocate in 1926, their economic stability ended soon after establishing their home in Texas. “My mother never had to work during Mexico. My sister, Delfina, remembered playing with chests of money because money didn’t mean anything [in Mexico].”<sup>5</sup> For the first time, their mother had to obtain employment to help support their family.

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<sup>2</sup> Elena Guerra, interviewed by Markel Riojas, video recording, 6 Nov. 2006, Folder 471, VOCES Oral History Project Archive (hereinafter VOCES OHPA), Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, phone conversation with Joyce Mays, transcript, San Antonio, TX, 9 May 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; note, “during” is incorrect grammar but is kept within text because it is a direct quote.

The largest population of ethnic Mexicans settled in southwestern states of California, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas.<sup>6</sup> According to labor historian Zaragoza Vargas, “about 1,422,533 Mexicans lived in the United States in 1930 a figure representing a 75 percent growth in the Spanish-speaking population since the last census counts in 1920.”<sup>7</sup> Delfina recalled her siblings’ fears of moving north of the border not only because of their privileged life in Mexico, but because of constant rumors that “Mexicans only worked in the field or as housekeepers.”<sup>8</sup> These childhood understandings of the economic positions of ethnic Mexicans reflected real life experiences of Mexicans in the U.S. economy. Accordingly, historian David Montejano posits that ethnic Mexicans were pushed and restricted to unskilled occupations, while Anglos dominated the skilled labor force in Texas.<sup>9</sup> Their social and economic positions within the larger labor force and social sphere was shaped by racial attitudes, and the economic and political atmosphere in Texas.

Employers integrated the Southwest’s tradition of racism into the edifice of labor relations to guarantee efficiency and powerlessness. Racism inexorably determined how the Mexican would be employed, and racism’s political, cultural, and legal underpinnings made it difficult, but no wholly impossible, to mount collective resistance against this situation of near total subjugation.<sup>10</sup>

Because the ethnic Mexican population was concentrated in the southern region of Texas, El Paso, and San Antonio, cheap labor was extracted from those regions. Ethnic Mexicans made up most of the agricultural labor force of Texas, which produced forty percent of the country’s vegetables and fruits.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, South Texas was the

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<sup>6</sup> Vargas, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Delfina Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 5, Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>9</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987) 263.

<sup>10</sup> Vargas, 17

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 17- 18.

primary source of cheap labor in the entire United States.<sup>12</sup> Cotton was another major motor driving the Texas economy. Mexican labor dominated the cotton industry. Farmers took advantage of modern tools, shifting away from tenant farming practices.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this resulted in the utilization of ethnic Mexicans as cheap laborers in the cotton farming industry in Texas. “Farmers at one time had paid sharecropper and tenant families \$800 for the year but now paid migrant families only \$250 a year for the cotton harvest.”<sup>14</sup> However, the demand for cheap labor from the south soon turned into a demand for deportation.

The Great Depression hit the U.S. population, affecting all racial and ethnic groups in the country, new or old immigrants. Even though Wilhemina and Delfina recalled being economically privileged in Mexico, their mother had to work for the first time in her life during the Great Depression. With their father gone, Otilia Cooresman relocated her children to San Antonio where they all shared a one bedroom apartment. Delfina took on the role of caretaker while her mother worked long hours at Alamo Laundry, making sure her siblings were fed and taken care of. Delfina recalled that “some families would let their children leave to go find jobs or live with other families, because they could not support them anymore.”<sup>15</sup> All of the Cooresman children were required to have part time jobs after school so they could help provide the household with income.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 18

<sup>13</sup> Montejano, 263.

<sup>14</sup> Vargas, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Delfina Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 4, Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Josephine, raised by her grandparents, explained her experience in the Great Depression as “pretty lucky. My grandfather and grandmother and always planted a garden, and all during the Depression. We didn’t have any money but we had plenty to eat because we got it out of the garden.”<sup>16</sup> Like Josephine, Ester lived on a farm in which they planted cotton, corn, and other vegetables. Her family made a living from farm labor, which delayed her entrance into the Fall school year because she had to wait until the cotton was picked.

By 1930, the ethnic Mexican population in Texas made up 11.7 percent, or 683,581 of the total population, 5,824,715.<sup>17</sup> According to Vargas, ethnic Mexicans in the United States were used as the “universal scapegoats” during the Great Depression. They were blamed for the limited job opportunities available to other “Americans” who needed the work, and faced the possibility of deportation. During the repatriation, an estimated 345,839 ethnic Mexicans were forcibly relocated to Mexico.<sup>18</sup> Mexican people who were U.S. born, also took the brunt of this new policy causing resentment towards Mexican immigrants. “In their eager rush to “get rid of Mexicans,” some local administrators intentionally processed American-born citizens and legal residents for repatriation.”<sup>19</sup> Of the total number of ethnic Mexican people who were deported, “more than 70 percent left from Texas.”<sup>20</sup>

Although the government and society complained about the “Mexican problem,” they continued to hire them for cheap wages. In Texas, while ethnic Mexican males’ wages were low, ethnic Mexican women’s wages were even more substandard. The women were “working

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<sup>16</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>17</sup> Zamora, appendix 1.

<sup>18</sup> Vargas, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 51.

longer hours for less than half of what their male counterparts earned” with most of them being “paid less than five dollars for six days of work, some working nine or more hours a day.”<sup>21</sup> But even the meager wages were higher than those paid in Mexico.

Most of the ethnic Mexican women were designated to domestic roles or worked in the cigar or garment sector. “Mostly young and single, Mexican and Tejana women made up 79 percent of San Antonio’s low-paid garment, cigar, and pecan shelling labor force.”<sup>22</sup> In Texas, it is estimated 15,000 and 20,000 ethnic Mexican women worked within their own homes, sewing garments for up to fifteen hours per day.<sup>23</sup> The amount of garments that were being produced did not reflect the money they received for their intricate work. Like the garment workers, domestic laborers were cheated of wages, sometimes not even receiving money but material things in return for their service. “In one case, a Spanish-speaking domestic worker who was supporting a family of five was paid approximately fifteen cents a day, and in another case, a maid had been paid ten cents a day over a two-year period.”<sup>24</sup> Cigar workers were also pressured to roll an impossible number of cigars and not paid for additional work.<sup>25</sup>

The country’s economic, political, and social climate during the 1930s resulted in a surge of union uprising. Ethnic Mexican women in particular, “engaged in strikes not only to win higher wages and better working conditions, but also because they conceptualized their resistance struggle as contesting racial, ethnic, and gender conflict.”<sup>26</sup> As labor historian Sonia Hernandez points out, “Mexican women wage earners stepped up efforts to organize. Like their

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 76.

*cigarrera* and *costurera* counterparts in Linares, Montemorelos, and Monterrey, Mexican women cigar makers and pecan shellers in the El Paso and San Antonio regions rallied to voice demands regarding their dire economic situation.”<sup>27</sup> Exploitative wages became a critical problem, especially with the anti-immigration movement occurring at the time. as Hernandez points out, pecan shellers’ “the workrooms lacked proper ventilation, workers sat on backless benches, and the only tools they had for crushing pecan shells were their own hands.”<sup>28</sup> These substandard working conditions were not only prevalent in the pecan shelling workplace, but other industries as well. *Cigarreras*, *costureras*, pecan shellers, and domestic laborers went on strike throughout the 1930s. As a result of their activism, they were faced with legal threats of deportation and harassment by government and local officials.

Ethnic Mexican women were not the only ones striking. Anglo American citizens were also protesting against “scabs,” those who were hired for cheaper labor. After migrating to the United States, Delfina and Wilhemina’s mother, Otilia, obtained employment at Alamo Laundry in San Antonio. Being that Otilia’s husband struggled to find work she became the family’s breadwinner.<sup>29</sup> “Income from Mexico stopped when Papa left Mexico...When income suddenly stopped coming in from Mexico my mother took whatever work she could.”<sup>30</sup> Although it was

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<sup>27</sup> Sonia Hernández, *Working Women Into the Borderlands* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 115.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> Wilhemina recalled her father Johannes Cooresman, a Dutch Immigrant, losing his job in a Dutch petroleum company when Mexico nationalized their industries. Eventually, their father lost all his ranch and business assets because he was not able to claim his investments, since he was not a Mexican or US citizen. Her father then became a photo journalist, taking pictures of Mexico, with a ‘Mr. Schultz’. The photos were printed in the US and Mexico. The president of Mexico released a death threat for whoever was taking the pictures because they presented Mexico in a bad light. Although the photographers were anonymous, Mr. Schultz was eventually murdered and her father moved to Texas permanently in fear of his life. Wilhemina Vasquez, phone conversation with Joyce Mays, transcript, San Antonio, TX, 9 May 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin., Wilhemina Vasquez, letter to Lynn Walker, 17 May 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>30</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, letter to Lynn Walker, 17 May 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

her first job, “she worked whatever she could. She kept us all together until Papa could come home.”<sup>31</sup> Along with labor strikes, anti-Mexican sentiments in the workplace increased due to employment scarcity during the Depression. Wilhemina recalled her mother’s experience with a strike at Alamo Laundry. “Some of the strikers were walking in front of our house” chanting “scab”. She assumed they thought her mother was an “illegal immigrant and she was not.” Wilhemina remembered being scared, although a deputy lived next door, because “they were holding torches.”<sup>32</sup> “These were the days of the Depression but we as children did not know it.”<sup>33</sup>

Women’s economic positions did not inhibit the aspirations their parents had for their daughters. Elena remembered her parents’ dedication to her schooling “and they wanted us to really make use of our education and not to fool around.”<sup>34</sup> Education became an important goal for these women, with most of them graduating high school before the start of the war. Ester remembered loving school immensely, so much that her parents kept her from attending her classes as a punishment. Julia became the only one in her family to graduate high school, and soon after received a job at Kress in 1938. She became a sales lady, as did Delfina and Josephine. Out of the eight women interviewed, Wilhemina was the only woman who did not attain a high school diploma due to the start of the war. She dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen to join her sister, Delfina, in the defense employment industry.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, phone interview by Kim Lupe, 29 March 2006, page 11, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>33</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, letter to Lynn Walker, 17 May 2006. Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>34</sup> Elena Guerra, interviewed by Markel Riojas, video recording, 6 Nov. 2004, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

The dedication to their education did not exclude these women from discrimination in their academic spaces. Throughout their school years, most of the women remembered being discriminated against for their language, color, and race. As a student in Stephen F. Austin Elementary, Elena's teacher changed her name to Helen because they had "difficulty pronouncing Elena. They called me such names that I never knew they were calling on me. They reprimanded me severely for not responding to the name being called."<sup>35</sup> One teacher "pulled me out of my seat and shook me. I was so frightened, I wet my pants... What an awful day. I cried and told my father I did not want to return. But, return I did."<sup>36</sup>

Although they were not segregated in primary or secondary school, Elena and others experienced many forms discrimination by classmates and teachers alike. Maria Thomas, a student in the city of Brownsville, recalled a teacher telling her "you Mexican people you try to apply yourself and do this and that... she says the only you're good for is to be a house-maid."<sup>37</sup> Even though all ethnic Mexican students were discriminated against, she remembered her male counterparts were treated harsher. Maria's experience with her teacher's hostile and racist remark depicts the racial and gendered expectations these women already faced as children. Her future employment was being racially designated by an authority figure, telling her she was expected to be a housemaid.

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<sup>35</sup> Elena Guerra, interview subject information form, page 2, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>36</sup> Cristina McCoy, "In her own words: The story of mom's life," email to Raquel Garza, 18 February 2007, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>37</sup> Maria Thomas, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.



Ester dealt with racial tensions between Czech and Latina/o population in Fort Bend County. She was “discriminated against, ostracized, [and] made to stay by herself.”<sup>38</sup> She remembered how her bus driver segregated the Latina/o children from their Czech classmates on their way to school. Ester and her siblings became mortified with the daily occurrences on their ride to school that they began to avoid the bus all together. Sometimes the driver purposefully left without them, making them “run to catch a bus.”<sup>39</sup> When their father caught on to their tendency of skipping school as a result of the bus driver’s behavior towards his children, he discussed the issues with the driver. Ester’s skin color was also an issue as she was constantly compared to her father and brothers, who were “*blancos* (white).”<sup>40</sup> Ester’s noticeably darker shade caused family members and strangers to point out the difference in with skin color.

Ester was not the only woman to be discriminated because of her skin color in contrast to her family members. Delfina, a “*morenita*”, encountered discrimination because her darker skin pigmentation did not reflect the White last name she inherited from her Dutch father, Johannes Cooremans.<sup>41</sup> She was repeatedly questioned regarding her last name, her relations to her siblings, and father because “she didn’t look like she fit in the family.”<sup>42</sup> Her sister, Wilhemina, even recalled instances where “teachers would ask her where she got that name, “Cooremans.”

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<sup>38</sup> Ester Perez, interviewed by Gail Fisher and Erica Martinez, video recording, 23 May 2002, indexed by Joel Weickgenant, 8 March 2004, page 2, Folder 211, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>39</sup> Ester Perez, interviewed by Gail Fisher and Erica Martinez, video recording, 23 May 2002, Folder 211, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Delfina Cooresman Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 9 July 2005, Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.; Wilhemina Vasquez, letter to Lynn Walker, 17 May 2006, Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>42</sup> Delfina Cooresman Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 9 July 2005. Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

She had to defend her name.”<sup>43</sup> Aside from discrimination in school setting, Wilhemina also recalled the different treatment she and her siblings received when they went out with each of their parents separately. Although their father was Dutch and mother was Mexican, they never concerned themselves with their parents’ racial/ethnic background, even though it played a factor in their family outings. “We never considered that he was better than mama or mama was better than he was... but when we went out with father, we could go anywhere.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite her first years in grade school, Elena had pleasant memories when it came to her experiences with race relations in school. However, the community did not act kindly as her classmates did:

There were incidences of discrimination, but not on part of the school or students. Our senior gathering was held at Landa Park in New Braunfels. I was president of the senior class. While we were enjoying our time in the pool, a young man approached me and asked me to come out of the pool. He asked if I was Mexican. I told him my parents had been born in Mexico, but that I was born here and was a citizen of the United States. No matter. We left the park. I graduated from high school, and I must say that I was valedictorian.<sup>45</sup>

Although race relations in her school did not hinder Elena’s success in finishing her high school education with honors, her father’s protective nature deterred the possibility of pursuing higher education. Her academic accomplishments during high school earned her scholarships and choices to attend any college/university in the state. However, her father’s history in Mexico caused major concern for her safety if she left home. He still believed “Mexican officials could harm him and or his family” due to his

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<sup>43</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, phone interview notes taken by Raquel Garza, 4 April 2007, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin..

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*

<sup>45</sup> Cristina McCoy, “In her own words: The story of mom’s life,” email to Raquel Garza, 18 February 2007. Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

perceived treacherous actions against his country during the occupation of Veracruz.<sup>46</sup> Elena's father preferred she stay at home, where he could keep a close eye on her as well as the rest of the family. In addition to her father's safety concern, he was also apprehensive about letting his daughter near "inappropriate behavior of 'American' male college students."<sup>47</sup> She stated, "I very much wanted to attend college, to continue my education" however, "these well-intentioned, yet misguided fears, kept me from accepting any scholarship."<sup>48</sup> Sadly, she added, "My father's fears blocked that dream."<sup>49</sup>

These women remember working part-time jobs after school to help with finances at home. They unselfishly contributed their earnings to help pay bills, buy food, and with any extra necessities their family required. In addition to helping their families, Aurora recalled the little extra money that she and her sister kept was used to buy clothing, makeup, and used for trips to the movies.<sup>50</sup> Julia and Delfina both picked up jobs as part time sales associates at the Kress department store. Ester continued to help her family doing farm labor.

Josephine worked at a department store to help support her child and husband. Before landing her job at Learners Dress Shop as a *costurera*, she was rejected from a sales position at a high-end retail store for refusing to use her father's Anglo American last name, instead of her husband's Spanish last name. "I had all the qualifications to

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<sup>46</sup> Elena Guerra, interviewed by Markel Riojas, video recording, 6 Nov. 2004, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>47</sup> Cristina McCoy, "In her own words: The story of mom's life," email to Raquel Garza, 18 February 2007. Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Aurora Castro, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 25 Oct. 2003, Folder 339, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

work,” but she continued, “he said, “Now, I’d be glad to give you a job, but you, why don’t you use your maiden name instead of your husband’s name.” And that way I could use Kelly and I wouldn’t be Ledesma. And you don’t wanna hear what I told him. But I didn’t get the job.”<sup>51</sup>

With her father unemployed due to health complications, Elena contributed all her earnings to the family’s living expenses. Her mother gave her a ten dollar monthly allowance from her check, which she always remembered to “save a certain amount...for a rainy day.”<sup>52</sup> Before Elena attained a job in civil service, she became the first ethnic Mexican secretary to be employed at the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce. She continuously experienced discrimination from coworkers and customers.

For a long time people stopped me in the lobby and asked silly questions like, “Are all Mexicans like you?”, and similar questions. Some of the executives were arrogant and at some of the board or committee meetings, they would come by my desk and plunk down a quarter or 50 cents and say, “Go get my some cigarettes,” or “Go get me a coke from downstairs and bring it up to me.” They would never ask any of the other secretaries to run errands for them. They never said ‘please’ or were courteous about their requests. One day, I made up my mind that I wasn’t going to do their bidding anymore and when they asked me, I told them, “I’m terribly sorry, but I have my work to do and I can’t run any errands. It would make them terrible angry. They would have to go down and buy their cokes or whatever they wanted themselves. But it didn’t bother me.”<sup>53</sup>

When she began exchanging letters with a serviceman, she “decided I wanted to something for the war effort also.”<sup>54</sup> All the women left their previous jobs to help with the war

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<sup>51</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>52</sup> Elena Guerra, interviewed by Markel Riojas, video recording, 6 Nov. 2004. Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>53</sup> Cristina McCoy, “In her own words: The story of mom’s life,” email to Raquel Garza, 18 February 2007, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

effort. Wilhemina would be the only one who would cut school short, at age fifteen, to join her sister to work in the defense industries.

### **New Economic Opportunities, Same Struggles, Shifting Roles**

United States entry into World War II affected the political, social, and economic landscape of the country. When World War II began, the United States was still entrenched in its economic depression. The war provided the country with an opportunity to regain its economic stability. The war called not only on soldiers, but generated the need for wartime production of aircraft, bombs, and weaponry.

With the late involvement in the war, the US needed to play a “game of catch-up” with Germany and Japan, who had a military and warfare production advantage. Military installations were built throughout the nation and by 1942, war production quadrupled and “surpassed the combined manufacturing output of the Axis powers.”<sup>55</sup> Although California’s wartime production and employment data recovered in an accelerated rate as a result of the war, Texas also regained its economic foothold in the country. With its manufacturing value increasing from \$453,105,423 in the initial stage of the war to \$1.9 billion in 1944, Texas became one of the leading states in wartime production.<sup>56</sup> “The Texas economy remained a major production site in the Southwest, especially in the oil, agriculture, aircraft construction and repair, shipping, munitions, and military installations.”<sup>57</sup>

Wartime recovery in Texas was generated by a variety of crucial elements needed for victory abroad. The growth in the cotton and agricultural production in South Texas resulted in

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<sup>55</sup> Zamora, 24.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 24.

increased wages for cotton pickers from “\$1.25 to \$2.25 per hundred pounds between 1941 and 1943.”<sup>58</sup> Oil refineries located in Houston, Corpus Christi, and Beaumont also provided individuals with a better pay and skilled work opportunities. However, the most significant increase of wartime employment was in the defense industries in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>59</sup>

A vast number of military installations in Texas contributed to its recovering economy, but even more important, it offered semi-skilled and skilled job opportunities to individuals who did not have access before. “The shipyards, the airship factories...and the military and naval installations slowly , reluctantly, and with much misgivings, began to give the Mexicans Americans a trial in semi skilled positions, and even in some skilled jobs.”<sup>60</sup> Military bases expanded in Laredo, Mission, Galveston, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. During the war, San Antonio possessed the primary military site in Texas, which housed Camp Travis, Dodd Field, Kelly Field, Stinson Field, Fort Sam Houston, Randolph Field, Camp Normoyle, and Brooks Field. In 1942, Duncan Field was combined with Kelly Field, making it the “army’s major aircraft repair site in the country.”<sup>61</sup> The newly fortified Kelly Field expanded five miles long, with barracks, hangars, machine and assembly shops, laboratories, offices, and air strips.<sup>62</sup> By 1943, San Antonio’s military installations provided 38,297 civilians with employment.

True to its times, a *Business Week* headlined “Now it can be seen. Our entire manpower problem is most acutely a problem in womanpower.”<sup>63</sup> In tradition to the country’s patriarchal society, the men were called first to serve their country in a multitude of wartime employment

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>60</sup> Montejano, 269.

<sup>61</sup> Zamora, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>63</sup> Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II: History of Women in America* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2008), 116.

capacities. Thousands of men rushed to enlist in the Armed Forces while others took up jobs in defense industries. Perfectly stated by Doris Weatherford, “Ten million men had gone to war, and virtually all of those who remained at home were already employed; clearly the additional planes and tanks and ships that were ended would have to be built by women.” The admission of women into the defense manufacturing industries was not accepted in immediate response to the war. It took some time for the industries to admit women into their male-dominated employment spaces.

At the beginning of the war, of course, the United States was still plagued by Depression unemployment, and the first defense jobs naturally went to men. Then came the women who were truly unemployed and underemployed- those who had been denied decent jobs in the thirties and who wanted and needed them. By the end of the 1942, these ranks had been absorbed, and the cry went up for a new type of worker- the housewife who didn’t necessarily want or need to work.<sup>64</sup>

A Federation News magazine printed by the General Federation of Women’s Clubs headlined *Work for Defense--- Pray For Peace!*<sup>65</sup> The article underscored the maternal duty of American women to protecting and caring for their country against the evils of the war, particularly Germany’s dictator, Adolf Hitler.

No woman wants war. Women detest war. Women suffer the most poignant grief when war comes to a country, -- but we have a Dictator loose in the world today and he has stated that he means to dominate the world, and step by step he is conquering one country after the other. Shall we follow the example of France, England, and other countries by saying, “It can’t happen here?” They lost thousands of young men and many persons were maimed due to lack of adequate national defense.<sup>66</sup>

Their femininity was reinforced by declaring their contestation of war is natural, but their involvement is imminent in order to shelter their loved ones from Hitler’s immorality.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Women’s Monday Club Folder, Texas Federation News, 1941- June Dec, 1943 Feb- June, Folder 42.12, Corpus Christi Public Library.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, June 1941.

As the war intensified, men and production were in high demand. Males were thrust into the military, while more women were pushed into the workforce. By 1940, there was a total of 11.5 million wage-earning women in the entire country; however, the wartime industrial production was still in need of employees.<sup>67</sup>

Multiple forms of media also took part in encouraging women to support the war in any capacity they could. The radio continuously promoted the idea of women's responsibility in serving their country, applying the sense of maternal duty to their children, sons, and husbands and in larger part to the American society. A housewife from Virginia stated that "Over and over for months I heard from the radio the call for women to enter war work. I had been delaying for one reason or another but I finally recognized these arguments in favor of my going to the shipyards." In Seattle alone, the radio recruited 2,200 women in in defense industries in just the first four weeks of promotion.<sup>68</sup> The radio drew on emotional ties of women to the war effort, constantly reminding them of the danger their sons and husbands were dealing with overseas.

Along with the radio, numerous newspapers, advertisements, magazines, and television media all over the country engaged in recruitment efforts for the war. The War Power Commission and the Office of War Information worked closely with the media and print industries to make certain that women were portrayed as motivated and accepting of their new roles as dedicated citizens and caring of their mother country at war. No matter what type of job it was, they made sure to attract women by presenting them as feminine as possible while doing a "masculine" job.

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<sup>67</sup>Naomi Quiñonez, 246.

<sup>68</sup> Weatherford, 116.



In order to appeal to women in the country, the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter was created. “The predominant media portrayal of women war workers was that they were young, white, and middle-class; furthermore, that they entered the labor force out of patriotic motives...”<sup>69</sup> The most popular image that was produced by the wartime campaigns was Rosie the Riveter. Rosie represented a working woman of America, flexing support for her nation with a muscular pose exposing her manlike forearms, pronouncing an encouraging statement “We Can Do It!” Her masculine physical features inspired women to take up males’ occupations while still maintaining their feminine essence of beauty. Rosie the Riveter became a symbol of the war’s effect on redefining women’s abilities. With the war’s employment opportunities, women could step out of office or domestic spheres to weld, build bombers, and operate a rivet gun among other “masculine” tools.

In addition to a gendered portrayal, Rosie the Riveter presented a depiction of its target audience’s citizenship, racial, and economic class. Rosie embodied the ideal wartime female; a White, working class American woman. The female with a bandana to keep her hair in place not only represented the working class women, but in American ideology, a person of white skin tone equated an American citizen. Therefore, ads were primarily aimed at not just all women in the country, but those who were citizens.

Newspapers all over the country ran headlines encouraging women to join the workforce, as other women had. They displayed pictures of women in different kinds of employment including chauffeuring, riveting, or welding. The majority of the advertisements all concealed the same underlying messages. Their objective should make sure that advertisements

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<sup>69</sup> Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 19.

highlight the occupations to which women should be drawn: clerical work, shipping, aircraft, nursing, heavy transport, service and trade. If these jobs could be linked with adventure, glamor, and romance, women might be more likely to seek employment where they were needed rather than to set sights on marriage or to take noncommittal attitude toward their work.<sup>70</sup>

Recruitment went beyond print media, radio, and television. Defense industries utilized women employees within their factories to go out and recruit. In Connecticut, the shipyards industry trained 22 women from local factories to go out and recruit women. They targeted “the five thousand women who had not replied to the recruiting letters. Each recruiter went in and sat down with the housewife and told her about war work as only a worker could do. The result was an average of sixty housewives were recruited by each interviewer.”<sup>71</sup>

A year after US active participation in the war, women only made up 9.2 percent of Texas’ workforce. Although they started entering the workforce at the initial stage of the war, their employment was limited to the food and service industries. There was a racial and gendered hierarchy practiced in the hiring process of wartime industries. As Montejano claimed earlier, even as the war intensified, the wartime employment industries were reluctantly letting ethnic Mexicans into the workforce. The pay was better which meant that it would go to the most qualified; in the country’s social ladder, this meant White males. Ironically, instead of going straight down the gendered ladder to other colored males, racial preference took precedence after gender. “Training programs administered by federal agencies and larger industrial plants such as North American Aviation from Dallas, for instance, favored Anglo women over Mexican and African American males and females.”<sup>72</sup> Even in Kelly Field, which

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Weatherford, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Zamora , 33.

had 35,000 employees, Mexican Americans made up an estimated 10,000 of the total, but were not given skilled positions beyond a laborer or mechanic's assistant.<sup>73</sup>

The percentage of women in the workforce multiplied from 9.3 percent in 1942 to 23.1 percent by the end of 1943.<sup>74</sup> Zamora points out “another way to appreciate women's entry into wartime industries is to compare their rate of incorporation to males. In 1943, women were hired almost three times faster than men.”<sup>75</sup> Although women's participation significantly increased, the comparison of the hiring process to that of males is not rightly justified. 1942 and 1943 marked the most crucial and intensified period in the war. When placed into the social context, defense industries were desperate for a workforce to produce the wartime demands. These women were hired in a threefold rate compared to men, but not by choice; a large number of American men either volunteered or were drafted, leaving women as the only supply of defense workforce. As Doris Weatherford stated earlier, the women were slowly brought into the workforce, but women who were “housewives” or those who were not in need of work were brought in as a last resort.

To examine Zamora's argument even closer, the incorporation of women into the defense industries was directed towards white, middle and working-class women, which was reflected in the Rosie the Riveter campaign. Maureen Honey furthers this analysis by arguing that although African American women were granted access to wartime employment industries, Anglo American females dominated the defense industries.<sup>76</sup> In a 1942 United States Employment Services Offices, the percentage of Anglo women workers, in both San Antonio and Dallas,

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<sup>73</sup> Montejano, 269.

<sup>74</sup> Zamora, 53.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Maureen Honey, ed., *Bitter Fruit: African American Women in World War II* (Columbia Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 35-38.

surpassed the Mexican and Black women registered in the labor force. In San Antonio, which had one of the highest proportion of ethnic Mexican people, ethnic Mexican women only made up 17.7 percent of registered workers compared to 64.4 percent of Anglo women and 17.9 percent of Black women.<sup>77</sup> In Dallas, Anglo women exceeded the number of Black women, and even more, those of Mexican descent. Compared to 262, 829 Anglo women, ethnic Mexican women only made up 7,699 of the total.<sup>78</sup> The total number of ethnic Mexican workers comprised a mere .9 percent compared to 85.7 percent of Anglo women and 13.4 percent of Black women.<sup>79</sup> The statistical distinctions depict the diversity among female workers during the war, with many of the numbers favoring the Anglo American women.

Although ethnic Mexican women “constituted the second largest group of working age women,” according to Zamora, they were recruited at a reduced rate evident “when one considers that Mexicans were the only ones who failed to make the registration list at a rate that equaled or exceeded their share of the total female population.”<sup>80</sup> In the beginning of 1943, 450,000 women worked in war related industries with the largest number of women reported working for aircraft production and repair. This particular sector of service obtained the highest percentage of female employees, which comprised 34 percent of its total workforce.<sup>81</sup> By 1945, the female workforce “increased by over 50 percent” since 1940.<sup>82</sup> Throughout the war, the need for women in the workplace improved the working conditions and extra services available to them. “They enjoyed steady hours, high wages, good working conditions, and, by 1942, daycare

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<sup>77</sup> Zamora, Table 2.2, 57.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid 58.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Quiñonez, 247.

centers.”<sup>83</sup> By the end of the war, women in the wartime employment industries made up 35 percent of the workforce, which estimated to approximately twenty million.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

CHAPTER III  
“KEEP ‘EM FLYING!”:  
*LAS MUJERES* IN THE WARTIME WORKFORCE

In Bergstrom Field, uh, our motto was to “keep ‘em flying”...It was very comfortable and very rewarding to know that you do something to make that airplane go.

Josephine Ledesma Walker<sup>1</sup>

Yes, we are Latina women but very proud to have serve[d] our country when she needed it no matter if it was behind the scenes...

Maria Thomas<sup>2</sup>

World War II began a few years before the United States involvement, therefore the US population “were aware of the war so early on,” as Wilhemina recalled.<sup>3</sup> Wilhemina’s father, originally from Holland, stayed up and listened to the radio, especially when Rodham had been bombed. His daughters recalled his constant worry over his relatives overseas. Their father’s anxieties would soon hit closer to home, as the United States became an active participant in the war. It was one thing to hear about the war going on overseas, but when the country officially

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<sup>1</sup>Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Thomas, letter to Israel Saenz, 3 April 2004, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, letter to Lynn Walker, 17 May 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

declared its involvement, the war soon occupied their minds and led to the transformation of women's roles.

In Austin, Josephine was busy working as a *costurera*, altering uniforms for military boys, as President Roosevelt publicly announced America's entry into the war. "World War II broke out while I was working for Learners Dress Shop on the avenue, and, naturally everybody, it was just everybody, screaming and hollering when we declared war."<sup>4</sup> The remaining women were spread throughout Texas in Brownsville, San Antonio, and El Paso. Despite her exposure to the news regarding the battles overseas, Wilhemina asserted that "all of us were so innocent, we didn't know anything about the war."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the emotional and social stress the war had on the American population, it granted the women better employment opportunities. Elena, Josephine, Ester, Maria, Aurora, Delfina, and Wilhemina all joined the war effort in different employment sectors. Whether it was aircraft mechanic, censorship, Civil Defense instruction, or pipe welding in a defense plant, these women attained jobs and positions that were unavailable to them before the war. These opportunities came with higher wages, skilled training, and a different forms of independence that allowed them to maneuver through their social, cultural, and employment spaces.

Julia Aguillon benefitted from the wartime shortage of workers in her department store. In 1942 she was promoted from sales clerk to receiving clerk, which allowed her to take Saturdays off.<sup>6</sup> Apart from her employment at the department store, Julia also "joined the Civil

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<sup>4</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin..

<sup>5</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, phone interview notes taken by Raquel Garza, 4 April 2007, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Aguillon, "Heartbreak and everyday life," *Narratives*, interviewed and written by Yolanda Urrabazo, Spring 2004, Folder 312, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Defense, teaching the skills that would be necessary in the event of an enemy attack.”<sup>7</sup> Not only were women able to attain higher status positions, but like Aurora, women also began to earn more. While working at the State Department of Public Welfare as a secretary, stenographer, and typist, she earned up \$100 a month.<sup>8</sup> “She remembers how jobs like hers made Hispanic women more independent, particularly because they could command larger salaries.”<sup>9</sup> Aurora then obtained a job as supervisor of military service records in Kelly Air Field base where she remained for a total of thirty nine years.

Each of the women had their own reason for joining the wartime employment industries. However, their motive shared similar themes of patriotism, better pay, and skilled employment opportunities. Additionally, some women were motivated because they had a personal connection with a male in the war, particularly in the military. They felt compelled to contribute to the war in any capacity they could since their boys were risking their lives for the country. “We were very proud that we were doing something good, something to help, to help the boys really.”<sup>10</sup> Maria represented these parallel themes well in joining the wartime effort when she stated “she gravitated toward the in-dustrial [sic] work during the war as an opportunity to learn new skills, earn money for her family and aid the young men serving the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Aurora Castro, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 25 Oct. 2003, Folder 339, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>9</sup> Aurora Castro, “Marching to the Music of Life”, *Narratives*, interviewed and written by Anna Zukowski, Spring 2004, 25 Oct. 2003, Folder 339, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Thomas, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Thomas, “Shorty steps up for her boys overseas,” *Narratives*, interviewed and written by Anna Zukowski, Spring 2004, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.



Maria contributed to the wartime effort as a pipe welder in a shipyard where she worked from six to five, six days a week. “It (the war) was in full force... And that’s why they needed us to go and help them to build these ships to get them out because they needed the ammunition, they needed the food and they needed to transport these boys where they had to go.”<sup>12</sup> The shipyard supervisors needed women to reach places in the ships that were unattainable to most men if attempted. The small spaces Maria was required to crawl into were not tiny and cramped, but required intricate work that placed women in danger. Maria’s work included “striking and sealing steel rods with precision and purpose.”<sup>13</sup> Maria’s petite figure would come to serve as an advantage for her position as a pipe welder. “I was so proud because man I did it just exactly the way they wanted to and here I come out—‘hi shorty you did pretty good.’”<sup>14</sup>

Elena’s encounter with a soldier who became her husband, initiated her involvement in the war. “I wanted to do something for the war effort also. There was a call for Spanish-English translator to monitor the long distance calls and international telegrams. Of course the pay was much better.”<sup>15</sup> Elena fulfilled her dream of working for the U.S. government when she gained employment with the Office of the Chief Cable Censor Branch of Naval Intelligence in San Antonio. She held a high security appointment in which she translated, censored, and interpreted messages for the government. She was in charge of translating intercepted messages from Mexico and Spain and censored war material that was considered problematic. “I blackened all

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<sup>12</sup> Maria Thomas, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Thomas, *Narratives*, interviewed and written by Anna Zukowski, Spring 2004, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Thomas, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>15</sup> Cristina McCoy, “In her own words: The story of mom’s life,” email to Raquel Garza, 18 February 2007, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

material, words, sentences that were deemed ‘sensitive’ and classified. Secrecy was essential. Talking about war related information was not permitted.”<sup>16</sup> Due to the confidential material she was exposed to in her line of work, she was expected to keep her oath of secrecy and not discuss any of which she knew.

Delfina tested into the Civil Service and received one of the three highest scores, which gave her the opportunity to choose her location and work. She had originally leaned towards Washington, D.C, but her father denied her approval because he did not want men to take advantage of his innocent and young girls.<sup>17</sup> She abided her father’s wishes and chose Kelly Air Force Base to be closer to home. Even though Delfina was of age, she was required to accept her father’s authoritative regulations on her life choices. Delfina and Wilhemina continued to live under his patriarchal control but later learned to negotiate with him, which allowed them to eventually leave across the country. Wilhemina had a deeper connection with wanting to join the wartime effort; she wanted to follow in her sister Delfina’s footsteps. At age 15 when the war began, she dropped out of school to join Delfina at Kelly Field.

In 1942, both sisters started in Kelly Field as aircraft mechanics. While Delfina worked as a Junior mechanic balancing and fixing damaged propellers, Wilhemina “worked magnifluxing the propellers – she looked for cracks to make sure they were all sealed; then she went to the fuel cell repair department and repaired the deicer on the airplanes.”<sup>18</sup> Although neither sister could recall what they were getting paid, Wilhemina believed “it was based on an

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Delfina Cooresman Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>18</sup> Wihemina Vasquez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 6, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

annual salary but it was more than we had ever earned.”<sup>19</sup> Throughout their wartime employment, both sisters would send all their earnings home except money they would need for living expenses.

In an ironic twist, Josephine was placed in a position that made her the patriotic figure in her family. Josephine’s husband had been drafted into the military, stirring a patriotic reaction in her. She immediately signed up when the recruiters showed up at one of the local Austin high school to recruit women for employment at the Randolph Field in San Antonio. “They were trying to get as many women as they could to let the men off. So I went to, I signed up.”<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for Josephine, her achievement in the qualifying exams was bittersweet. “In the time when I was accepted they passed a law that all the men that had children didn’t have to go to war. And so he didn’t have to go and I was already stuck.”<sup>21</sup> While her husband came home, she reported for duty at Randolph Field and remained committed to serving her country in time of war.

Ester, Josephine, and Elena were positioned in unique and pioneering positions of employment. Josephine began training for aircraft repair in 1941 in Randolph Field for six months. During her time there, she became the only woman training in the hangar out of at least one hundred.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, aside from one other man, she was the only ethnic Mexican on her shifts. She worked alongside the soldiers, civilians, and other trainees in hands on repair instruction. Similarly, when Ester gained employment in January of 1942, she “was the first

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<sup>19</sup>Wilhemina Vasquez, letter to Lynn Walker, 17 May 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>20</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

female engine repair mechanic at Kelly Field.”<sup>23</sup> Like Josephine, she was also the only ethnic Mexican women and Latina at work. Additionally, Elena was the only ethnic Mexican women at her naval base. “I was the only Mexican there (in the office) and I didn’t let it bother me.”<sup>24</sup> The women accepted the opportunities to be the first and only ethnic Mexicans in their workplace, in addition to taking on a previously male dominated position. Although the women were the only ethnic Mexicans in their employment locations, they did not let it upset or disrupt their work. Conclusively, these women broke through gendered and racial barriers through their wartime employment positions.

When Josephine’s training finished in San Antonio, she was able to get her location of employment request approved for Bergstrom Field in Austin. When she was transferred, the facility was still under construction, making the new employees in charge of continued construction. Josephine remembered “putting out sidewalks; we were making it them two by fours and boards across.”<sup>25</sup> Shortly thereafter, she started her work days at seven in the morning, prepared for the days’ work, and headed to the hangars to work on damaged planes from the war. “They were flying into Bergstrom to be fixed and to fly back into combat. So I wasn’t the only one, there was hundreds of people working on airplanes and also the soldiers were working on airplanes. They had their own planes to work on and when they came in they were just fixed and they flew back.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ester Perez, interviewed by Gail Fisher and Erica Martinez, video recording, 23 May 2002, Folder 211, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>24</sup> Cristina McCoy, “FW: Elena Pimental Guerra (1917- 2006)” email to Raquel Garza, 26 Feb. 2007, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>25</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

The Bergstrom labor force worked all day and night to make sure the aircraft made it back to war as fast as possible. Josephine worked eight to twelve hour shifts, depending on the amount of labor that awaited in the hangars. “We always had six or seven in the hangars waiting, tore down in different kinds of ways, some from one side some from the other.”<sup>27</sup> Employees worked on different parts of the plane which included the electrical, engine, hydraulic, and the fuselage. Josephine’s job was to repair the aircraft “even if it took all day and all night, so that airplane could get out and get on the field and get going... In Bergstrom Field we would, uh our motto was “keep’em flying.”<sup>28</sup>

Josephine’s main job was the fuselage, “the body of the plane,” tightening the fuses and running wires to other parts of the aircraft.<sup>29</sup> This type of labor was complex and required extra caution. “That’s why they like for women to have it, because they had smaller hands and they could get more nearer to it.”<sup>30</sup> She then began working on the engines of the plane, and became a general mechanic working “on anything that came along.”<sup>31</sup> Josephine recalled working with only two other women in Bergstrom in 1941. One had been a secretary and the other a school teacher before the war. The rest of Josephine’s first year was spent in Bergstrom until she transferred to the Big Spring Army Airfield bombardier base. Again, when she entered this base she became the only ethnic Mexican and the only woman to work in aircraft repair. The only other women “were in sheet metal department. There was about five or six and they were all Anglos.”<sup>32</sup> Once more, she negotiated a transfer of employment, but this time for her husband. Her husband was employed with Lockheed in Dallas building aircraft so she asked the colonel

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

for a possible hire, and it was approved. The next three months were spent together but eventually she quit and moved back to Austin with her husband due to the hostile environments.

While Josephine negotiated her location of employment between her family and her job, Wilhemina and Delfina negotiated the opportunity to travel with their father. Mr. Cooremans had already denied Delfina the opportunity to work in Washington, DC in 1942 but as the war intensified, both sisters negotiated a deal with him. They were allowed to move to Seattle to work in the Boeing Aircraft industry if they went together, and so they did. “Their father let them go this time because it was during the war and saw that women had a part to play in the war and it was their civic duty to do what they could.”<sup>33</sup> In Boeing they worked six days out of the week, leaving their one day off to explore their new environment. Wilhemina recalled a time when she accompanied a friend to the train station thinking she was there to pick someone up, but instead found “lots of women waiting and assumed they too were all waiting for someone; when the train stopped, servicemen got off and started hugging and kissing her. She was miserable and kept looking around for the person they went to meet so they could leave and she saw that her friend Ethel did this on all her days off.”<sup>34</sup> She learned that women waited for soldiers to arrive so they could greet them, even though they had never met before.

Ester’s curiosity for the world impelled her to volunteer overseas despite her parents’ lack of approval and support. Knowing that her parents would not react well to her decision, Ester told them it was mandatory for her job. However, Ester’s mother did not buy into her

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<sup>33</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 6, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>34</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 7. Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

daughter's sneaky attempt to bypass her authority. "Mother was no fool," but eventually her family grew to support her overseas duty as brave.<sup>35</sup> In mid-1944, Ester traveled to Sacramento, California to train for engine repair, specifically for engine installation. After three months of training she arrived at her assigned base in Honolulu Hawaii along with thirty-nine other women to restore damaged aircraft needed for the war. Ester made Hawaii her home for two years, even after World War II had come to an end.

The women also took advantage of being away from their parents' watchful eyes. Elena remembered "my life was very sheltered... my brothers and I were never allowed to go anywhere alone. We went everywhere with my mother and dad."<sup>36</sup> Growing up, the women were under the supervision of their parents or older male siblings. "We were chaperoned" recalled Wilhemina, whose father imposed strict dating rules on his daughters and their dates.<sup>37</sup> Wilhemina remembered Mr. Cooremans' firm warnings and regulations: "There was no such thing as honking the horn – this is not a curb service! You have her home by 9 or she's yours!"<sup>38</sup> Wilhemina's dates always made sure to have her home by 8:45. The women were not allowed to go to out unless they were accompanied by their own parents or older male sibling. Furthermore, the women were not allowed to date unless they were chaperoned or their dates would be held at home, in the living room, or with their brothers present. Wilhemina recalled a chaperoned date on her front porch with her future husband, Mike. They were allowed to sit on the porch swing

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<sup>35</sup> Ester Perez, interviewed by Gail Fisher and Erica Martinez, video recording, 23 May 2002, Folder 211, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>36</sup> Cristina McCoy, "In her own words: The story of mom's life," email to Raquel Garza, 18 February 2007, Folder 471, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>37</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, phone interview by Kim Lupe, 29 March 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

“with the window open” but “if the swing started squeaking” their father came out to check on them.<sup>39</sup> These type of parental and patriarchal management over young women’s lives were common throughout the 1940s through the 1960s. Women were usually released from parental supervision only once they got married, placing them under a new type of patriarchal authority.

Ester remembered the men to women ratio as 50 to one, with the men constantly asking her on dates. She had a couple of boyfriends throughout her stay in Hawaii and even emphasizes that one was a “gringo.”<sup>40</sup> Eventually she got irritated and uninterested in the dating scene in Hawaii and kept to herself. Maria’s dating history consisted of only ethnic Mexican men until she met her future husband, James, an Anglo Navy soldier. She kept her relationship a secret until James asked for Maria’s hand in marriage telling her parents he was not “going to leave her behind. Maybe I won’t be back, but I don’t want to leave her behind for somebody else.”<sup>41</sup> Maria’s parents were left flabbergasted but ultimately supported her daughter’s wish to marry James.

The result of the new opportunities the wartime employment gave women was the exposure and intermingling of different cultures and ethnic/racial people that would have never been available to them before the war. Maria recalled the relationships she built with African American, Italian, Portuguese, and Anglo girls through the war. They shared and traded clothing and supplies with each other; “we shared as if we were one big, happy family.”<sup>42</sup> A specific memory with an African American woman stuck with her. After seeing a “colored” mother

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ester Perez, interviewed by Gail Fisher and Erica Martinez, video recording, 23 May 2002, Folder 211, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>41</sup> Maria Thomas, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



mourning her sons, she comforted her and hugged her “who was then surprised a ‘white’ girl was hugging her.”<sup>43</sup> Delfina and Wilhemina also established relationships with other peoples outside of their own racial/ethnic group. The sisters developed a close relationship with an African American couple that lived near them in Seattle, who they grabbed lunch with at times.

Despite the other women’s experiences, Josephine remembered the harsh treatment ethnic Mexicans had to face in Big Spring. “Big Spring was terrible with Mexican-Americans and Blacks. I think they had season, shooting season for them.”<sup>44</sup> Ethnic Mexicans had to make sure they stayed in one part of the town to receive service. She recalled a café that allowed her to order but not her husband. “They wouldn’t wait on him at all. So we both walked out of that shit place.”<sup>45</sup> The racist climate took a toll on the couple and eventually drove them to return to Austin.

Even through their groundbreaking positions of racial and gendered spaces in their workplace, it also served as a back lash for some of the women. Delfina recalled in 1942, when she entered Kelly Field, she could tell the men were uncomfortable working alongside women. The men’s resistance showed through in their attitude and language, referring to the women as “girls” on purpose.<sup>46</sup> In Quiñonez’s study, she also analyses oral histories of ethnic Mexican women in the defense industries and exposes the racial and sexual politics women endured in the workplace. She also found discrimination against the wages Latinos were earning compared to

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<sup>43</sup> Maria Thomas, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 13 Oct. 2003, indexed, page 5, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>44</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Delfina Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 7, Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

their counterparts. Delfina hated that “she saw everyone around her, including the people that she had trained, get promoted while she didn’t.”<sup>47</sup> This experience was, unfortunately, the reality of many workers of color during World War II. Similarly, as Honey argues on the plight of African American women workers during World War II, ethnic Mexican and African American women’s ability to gain employment was often hindered by racist and sexist attitudes by Anglo male and female employers and employees.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, the women allowed for women of color the ability to leave “household service for public sector service jobs that were better paying and had better working conditions” than were available to them before the war.<sup>49</sup>

When the war was over, the country was expecting for society to return back to normal. The men who survived the war overseas returned home and given the advantage of taking back their positions of employment, while women were pushed out. “Boeing started to get rid of women workers and expected them to go back to their “rightful place” but Wilhemina stated “they weren’t prepared to go back to work in “women’s work” because of the work they did during the war.”<sup>50</sup> Some women continued working as they grew accustomed to their financial and social independence, like Delfina and Wilhemina who returned to Kelly Field after the war. Others like Josephine, went home and devoted her time to her family.

Although women served their country in different employment industries, they enacted agency through their choices, actions, and work. Josephine negotiated between her personal and employment space. She was married and had a five year old boy when she entered the wartime

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<sup>47</sup>Delfina Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 10. Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>48</sup> Honey, *Bitter Fruit: African American Women in World War II*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 10. Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

workforce. Her mother and sister-in-law helped care for her child during her training in San Antonio. Her request and approval of placement in Austin allowed her to balance the role of mother and wife while she maintained the position of a skilled, working women in a wartime defense industry. “It’s hard to raise a family and work and try to keep house,” but she did it to support her country in time of need. After nearly two years, she returned back home to continue providing and caring for her family. “I was pretty happy doing the work that I was doing for my country, but uh, I enjoyed my life raising my kids.”<sup>51</sup>

While some, including Wilhemina and Delfina, negotiated location of employment with family, others like Ester signed to an overseas post without her parents’ consent. She outright contested her parent’s authority by making such a big step to move far away from home. The distance, for many of the women, served as a detachment from patriarchal management of their lives. They were able to date and court without having their parents’ supervision, enjoy their days off in the company of new acquaintances, and earn money to buy things of their own. Delfina’s “experiences during the war made her more independent; when they got back, she didn’t expect anything from their parents, instead she wanted to help her parents.”<sup>52</sup>

Even the discrimination they dealt with throughout their lives and the intermingling with people of other ethnic/racial populations asserted their identity as ethnic Mexican women. Wilhemina refuses to accept the terms “White” and “Hispanic” to identify herself. When people referred to her as “White”, “The hair on the back of my neck stands up...Because who makes that decision? I hate that word.” When people assumed Wilhemina was “Spanish” she reacted

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<sup>51</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>52</sup> Delfina Cooresman Baladez, interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005. Interview index, page 6, 24 Oct. 2005. Folder 489, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

with agitation. “People say to me, ‘Oh, you’re Spanish,’ and I say, ‘No, I speak Spanish. I’m Mexican. Mexican is not a bad word; unless that is your intent.’”<sup>53</sup>

The experiences that ethnic Mexican women endured during World War II shaped their individual lives. The opportunities that the war offered to women exposed them to different social spaces that had not been available to them. Their stories capture their experiences of negotiation, resistance, and accommodation during tough economic, racial, gender, and patriarchal struggles. Although time has passed, as Wilhemina recalled, “I lie in bed at night and I can put myself back in 1936, 1937, the Depression, the war.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez, phone interview notes taken by Raquel Garza, 4 April 2007. Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### "I'M NOT ASKING MY COUNTRY FOR MORE THAN THEY CAN GIVE ME, I GIVE TO MY COUNTRY WHAT I CAN": ETHNIC MEXICAN WOMEN IN THE ARMED FORCES

Let the Generations know that women in uniform also guaranteed their freedom. That our resolve was just as great as the men who stood among us. With victory our hearts were just as full and beat just as fast- that the tears as hard for those we left behind.

1LT Anne (Sosh) Brehm, US Army Nurse Corps<sup>1</sup>

To me, it was an experience I would not change for anything in the world, because not just anybody can have that...And my nightmares are with me, and my dreams are with me.

Maria Salazar<sup>2</sup>

The dominant World War II narrative portrays women either ignores their war efforts or depicts them as powerless, weak individuals who were left to deal with sustaining their familial and motherly obligations. Women are too often highlighted as individuals who took up occupations previously held by men in their contribution to the war effort. Moreover, women are generally presented as workers on the home front who soon after the war, returned to their

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<sup>1</sup> Cindy J. Weigand, *Texas Women in World War II* (Lanham, MD: Republic of Texas Press, 2003); "Memorial Glass Tablet Rededicated," *News and Events*, <http://www.womensmemorial.org/News/brehm.html> (accessed 26 Feb. 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nikki Munoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

domesticated roles within their familial spaces and carried on with their prewar lives. Despite their war time efforts, historians categorized women as minorities granted limited opportunities yet no radical changes occurred.<sup>3</sup> These historians argued that even though they participate in the war efforts to some extent, the changes that occurred during the war were not effective enough to change the norms of American society.

However, women indeed served in the armed forces, overseas and on the home front. Some served as undercover spies in Sweden and Finland for the Office of Strategic Services, while others were even Prisoners of War. Women trained, bled, starved, and endured the experience of war just as their male counterpart. In this chapter, I argue that although there was a decline of women's enlistment in the United States Armed Forces after the war, their participation in the service during World War II was a radical form of agency. Ethnic Mexican women in particular, enlisted and crossed multiple barriers of race, class, and gender, within a historically hegemonic institution such as the U.S. military.

The newspapers that announce the participation of ethnic Mexican women are all from the southern region of Texas which covers from San Antonio to Brownsville to McAllen, Laredo and Eagle Pass. A significant number of the ethnic Mexican women from Texas who served in the WACs were from South Texas because of its higher ethnic Mexican population. This high cluster of Mexican Americans was due to its close proximity to the border. The influx of Mexican immigrants to Texas before World War II spiked its population to 738,440, 11.5 percent of Texas' total population in the 1940s.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, due to enlistment dates ranging

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<sup>3</sup> D'Ann Campbell, "Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union", *The Journal of Military History* 57, no. 2 (April, 1993): 302, accessed 03/05/2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2944060>.

<sup>4</sup> Zamora, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs*, 224; Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America*, 18-26. Vargas dedicates 18-26 on the Mexicano population of Texas,

between 1943 and 1944, I have concluded that one of the reasons that ethnic Mexican women began joining was reflection of the lowered standards by the WACs in the beginning of 1943, which will be further explained in detail.

The study of ethnic Mexican women in the military requires a variety of analytical frames to deconstruct the multiple structural levels of their experiences. To study the military as an institution, the concept of war has to be examined at the macro-level but more importantly, we must consider a more intimate analysis at the micro-level. Women's position within the military structure is complex, multilayered and often marginalized from the dominant narrative of war. In order to unpack some of these complexities this chapter comprehends the lived experiences of ethnic Mexican women who served in the armed forces. I examine their cultural and political spaces before and during the war, and the agency of resistance, negotiation, and accommodation, they used towards institutionalized patriarchy and perceived gender roles. By doing so, we can better understand the various social and historical dynamics of the military in which ethnic Mexican women operated. This approach centered on the lived experiences of ethnic Mexican women in Texas who served in the military during World War II helps present women as decolonized, as suggested by scholars such as Vicki Ruiz and Emma Perez.

These ethnic Mexican women, already facing a hegemonic system of patriarchy, crossed multiple borders of race, gender, and often class. Their presence and active participation in the military was indeed a political act. It challenged conventional and arbitrary notions of femininity and domesticity by enlisting in the military which had been defined as a masculine space. Moreover, the most effective method to examine war and women would be through a racial lens.

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focusing on the South Texas Region which included El Paso, Laredo, San Antonio, and the Rio Grande Valley. He states that these regions in Texas had higher Mexicano population because of the continuous influx of laborers from 1910 to 1930s.

In order to decolonize the historical role of ethnic Mexican women in the military we must be critical of the way in which we document, describe, and analyze their experiences. Historians have written extensively on WWII paying little to no attention to the contributions made by women of color and ethnic Mexican women in particular. It is important to excavate the role of race and gender when examining women in World War II. This allows for a more inclusive account of history. Historical research on women of color has expanded the understanding of women and war, once missed by earlier historians that overlooked the contributions of Mexicanas/Chicana and or Xicanas, as well as other women of color, in the armed forces.

### **The G.I. was no Jane**

A soldier needs physical and moral courage, ingenuity and integrity, determination and loyalty, a sense of humor, and of course luck, to be successful in combat. I do not believe and did not see any evidence that these qualities are distributed on the basis of gender.

- Major Rhonda Cornum, POW of Operation Desert Storm<sup>5</sup>  
Since its inception, war has been identified as a masculine phenomenon and conceptualized as a male space. Scholar Carol Cohn points out that the understanding of the notion of war is gendered at the symbolic level. She analyzes war in association with ideas of:

Action, courage, seriousness, destruction, weapons, explosions, violence, aggression, fury, vengeance, protection, mastery, domination, independence, heroism, “doing”, hardness, toughness, emotional control, discipline, challenge, adrenalin, risk – all them which are coded “masculine” in most cultures.

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<sup>5</sup> Monica Biernat et al., “All That You Can Be: Stereotyping of Self and Others in a Military Context”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, no. 2 (1998): 301-17, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic472736.files/Biernat.pdf>; Major Rhonda Cornum was one of twenty three POWs (one of two servicewomen) of the Gulf War. During a rescue mission in Operation Desert Storm, her Black Hawk helicopter was shot down behind enemy lines. She suffered from two broken arms, shattered knee, and a bullet to her back. She was taken captive by the Iraqis, physically and mentally tortured, and brutally raped. She was kept for 8 days. Her survival as a POW initiated interrogation into the roles of women in the military, eventually opening up additional posts for women in the armed forces. In response to Cornum’s experience, Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Wilma Vaught argued that “This was a validation that if women are in combat and something like this happens they do have the strength, the stamina, the mental courage to meet the demands.” Rhonda Cornum and Peter Copeland, *She Went to War: The Rhonda Cornum Story* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993, 1992), 1-240.



These concepts shape and construct the identity of what males represent during war. The males' purpose and actions should reflect the standards and values that have been encultured into their gendered role. In contrast, peace is equated with the socially constructed characteristic of femininity. Furthermore, since women and femininity are at odds with men and masculinity, they are perceived as weak, passive, vulnerable, and unprotected. The most significant contributor to war is the military. This long lasting institution remains engendered and has maintained its masculine structure for centuries.

The military utilizes these deeply entrenched ideologies of gender to project, produce, and reinforce sexist ideals.

State militaries, armed insurgent groups, private military and security companies (PMSCs), multilateral security institutions.... Courts and police forces, families, educational systems, and religious institutions- all of these shape the conditions within which women experience war, try to survive, and attempt to build peace. And all of them are gendered in multiple senses.<sup>6</sup>

The United States began to question the role of women in the military during the Gulf War because of its significantly high necessity of women. Holmes argues that although women have participated in the military since the nation's establishment, this particular war had increased involvement rates. The Coastguard had 3,900 enlisted<sup>7</sup>, the Marine Corps had 223,000, 151,000 served in the selected reserves making it the largest in US history, with 378,000 women in military service.<sup>8</sup> According to Holmes, because of the increasing reliance on women for national defense during the Gulf War, women's roles sparked curiosity. Military officials

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Cohn, ed., *Women and Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*, rev. ed. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1992), 2,700 on active duty, 1,200 in reserves

<sup>8</sup> Holm, xiv.

questioned the role women should play in the military after demonstrating major involvement and dedication.

In the early 1990s, literature regarding women's presence in the United States Armed Forces began appearing. The scholarly interest in women's military involvement increased during this time period. The growing literature on women's participation in the military include Evelyn M. Monohan and Rosemary Neidel- Greenlee's *A Few Good Women: America's Military Women From World War I to the New Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, Doris Weatherford's *American Women and World War II*, Leisa D. Meyer's *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II*, Jean Hascall Cole's *Women Pilots of World War II*, and Ann B. Carl's autobiographical account, *A WASP Among Eagles: A Military Test Pilot in World War II*. Most of these writers are former military officers and personnel, such as Monohan and Neidel- Greenlee. These texts provide a foundation for the study of women in the armed forces.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite this growth there is little on female soldiers of color. Women of color continue to struggle within a gendered and racial institution that has maintained its social and racial hierarchy. The history of White American women in the United States Armed Forces (USAF) dominate women's military history pushing experiences and contributions of women of color in a marginalized position. While there have been autobiographies, chapters, essays, articles, and full length studies on White American women, few have been written on African Americans, Mexican American, and other women of color. There are few studies on African

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<sup>9</sup>Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II: History of Women in America* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2008), 1-338; Evelyn Monohan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, *A Few Good Women: America's Military Women from World War I to the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010) 1-446.; Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996),1-.; Ann Carl, *A Wasp Among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in World War II* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999),1-132.; Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995, 1992), 1-188.

American women in the military such as *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race: The Story of the Only African American WACS Stationed Overseas during World War II* by Brenda L. Moore and K.B. Daniels' *Social Construction of Race and Gender: Black Women Officers in the U.S. Navy*. Again, the literature remains scant. Historical documentation of Mexican American females in the military gets lost into nearly nonexistence as it competes for historical space in the narratives of Black and White Americans.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have scrutinized World War II from almost every possible angle, but an area that needs examination is the intersection of gender and race in the military. Although the literature on women in the military calls for expansion, I argue more research on women of color in the military. This study reaffirms the participation of ethnic Mexican women in the armed forces and serves to include their all too often, omitted and ignored narratives. By doing so this thesis will provide a contribution to the limited literature on ethnic Mexican women from which, to build further research can take place.

### **Women Have Always Served**

Women have contributed to war in limited capacities, but nonetheless, they have provided support. Since the Revolutionary War, women aided the war effort in various measures. The women accompanied American military units offering services such as cooking, cleaning, and washing laundry, among other things.<sup>11</sup> Some women even went as far as to disguise themselves in men's clothing to enlist in the army and served as soldiers. Women were

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<sup>10</sup> Brenda L. Moore, *To Serve My Country, to Serve My Race: the Story of the Only African-American Wacs Stationed Overseas During World War II* (New York: NYU Press, 1997),1-288.; Kathleen Daniels "The Social Construction of Race and Gender: Black Women Officers in the U.s. Navy" (master's thesis, Naval Post Graduate School, 1994), 1-62.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006)50-66.

messengers, spies, political smugglers, and soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Most importantly, they enacted agency through weaving, boycotting, discussing political issues privately and publicly, controlling their sexuality, and acting as political negotiators. As one woman wrote after reflecting on her role within the Revolutionary War, her participation was intently done to “inspire her brothers, her husband, and her sons, with such a love of virtue, such just ideas of the true value of civil liberty... that future heroes and statesmen... shall exhaltingly declare, it is to my mother I owe this elevation.”<sup>13</sup>

Women’s participation in the Civil War and Spanish- American War was prevalent, especially as they paved the way for the health care and medicine sector of the military.<sup>14</sup> During the Civil War, two thousand women performed nursing services for the Union and Confederate Armies.<sup>15</sup> However, even though women such as Clara Barton, a nurse, and Dr. Mary Walker, a surgeon, emerged as prominent health care providers of the Civil War, the Army resumed employing enlisted male soldiers as nurses after the war. Not until the Spanish-American War were women reappointed as nurses but only as civilians, not military personnel<sup>16</sup>. By the end of the Spanish-American War, more than fifteen hundred women served as nurses.<sup>17</sup> During the

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<sup>12</sup> Berkin, 92-147; Holm, 3-9. Evelyn Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, xvi-xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Berkin, 154. Holm, 3-9. Evelyn Monahan and Rosemary Neidel-Greenlee, xvi-xvii.

<sup>14</sup> “Circular No. 8: Matron Persons... will always have preference”, The National Archives Experience, <http://www.digitalvaults.org/#/detail/11781/> (accessed 26 February 2014); Holm, 7. Dr. Mary Walker and Clara Barton, Clara Barton established the Red Cross. Dr. Mary Walker, in 1864, became the first woman doctor in the Army where she served as an assistant surgeon. “She was awarded the Medal of Honor. Her medal, along with those of a number of male recipients, was withdrawn in 1917 when the Army raised its criteria for the award, but was finally restored by a special act of Congress in 1977.”

<sup>15</sup> Holm, 10. Women also disguised themselves as men to serve as soldiers, she approximates about 250 served as soldiers; “Discharge document for a soldier with "Sexual incompatibility." National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's—1917, RG 94) <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1993/spring/women-in-the-civil-war-2.html> (accessed 26 February 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Holm, 9. For further reading go to establishment of the Army Nurse Corps as an Army Auxiliary.

<sup>17</sup> “The Army Nurse Corps” *Women in the US Army*, <http://www.army.mil/women/nurses.html> (accesses 26 February 2014); Holm, 10. Holm also mentions that by 1901, even though they established the Army Nurse Corps, they were not given military status, equal pay, or other benefits granted to enlisted o military personnel. Not given until 1944, which will be discussed later.

United States' late involvement in the First World War, 34,000 women contributed as nurses in multiple military branches which included the Army and Navy Nurse Corps, Marines, and the Coast Guard.<sup>18</sup> Many of these women served overseas and received numerous awards and honors recognizing them for their devotion and unwavering patriotism to the war effort.<sup>19</sup>

### **Resistance**

Although women have historically proven their patriotism on and off the battlefields, women's inclusion in military space was continuously denied. The women wanted to be recognized as equal to their male counterparts sacrificing their lives during war. However, when the idea of establishing women's roles in the armed forces as official military status, it was constantly shut down. American society, particularly the military institution, was not ready to see women legitimizing their roles in the armed forces, except for medical nurses or clerical duties. Above all, they were not willing to share their masculine space with the dutiful servicewomen, who time and time again remained devoted to their country's wartime effort. They are repeatedly regarded as loyal helpmates in times of war, but their gender roles in the domestic and social spaces remain intact. Therefore, their patriotic contributions remain limited and overshadowed by the characterization of their actions as committed wives and devoted mothers.

When discussion of establishing a women's military unit within the armed forces took place, male military personnel resisted. Although nurses were given officer rank, they were still not granted full military status; they did not receive same pay as male counterparts, nor the same medical benefits, no legal protection if assigned overseas.<sup>20</sup> During the final stages of

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<sup>18</sup> Holm, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Holm, 24.

demobilization in 1925, the Navy and Marine Corps changed the language used in the Naval Reserve Act of 1916, requiring enlistees to be citizens to “male citizens”, in order to guarantee women be barred from enlistment.<sup>21</sup> During the latter half of the 1920s and the 1930s, debates regarding the establishment of a women’s military unit emerged, with the support of Douglas McArthur. However, after realizing the magnitude of resistance this idea provoked, dialogue ceased.<sup>22</sup> All paper work concerning the possibility of a women’s military unity remained buried within government documents.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, in May 1941, Congresswomen Edith Nourse Rogers presented the bill, H.R. 4906, which established the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. Congresswoman Rogers received extensive support from several women’s organizations which included the Oregon Women Ambulance Corps, the Green Guards, and Women’s League of Defense.<sup>24</sup> With the leadership of Rogers and the lobbying of the organizations, their combined efforts engaged General Marshall’s interest. He ordered the General Staff begin working up a proposal as well, which boldly stated their intent was “to permit the organization of a women’s force along the lines which meet with War Department approval, is that when it is forced upon us, as it undoubtedly will be, we shall be able to run it our way.”<sup>25</sup> The Army was not willing to admit women with full military

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<sup>21</sup> “The commissioned officers which shall be citizens of the United States... provided further, that persons hereafter commissioned in the Medical Corps shall be citizens of the United States...” found in *64<sup>th</sup> Congress, session I, Ch. 134. 1916. The Statutes At Large, United States Department of State, (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1875-1936) 171.* William Stooksbury, “The Marine Corps Infantry Selection and Assignment Process: Is It Ready for Gender Neutrality?” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1994), 14. Holm, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Holm, 17-20. Anita Phipps was appointed Director of Women’s Programs, which would consist of being a contact between the different women’s political organizations. However, once obtaining the position, she began advocating for a women’s military unit. This was not what General McArthur considered part of her job description, and because of his outright resistance to anything of this sort, he immediately fired her. The War Department took this as an embarrassment to their masculine space.

<sup>23</sup> According to Holm, there were three attempts to establish a women’s military unit. One by Phipps, one in 1928 by Maj. Everett S. Hughes, and the third in 1939 by George C. Marshall.

<sup>24</sup> Holm, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Mattie Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1954, 1991), 17, accessed February 16, 2014, <https://archive.org/details/CMHPub11-8>. Memo, Brig Gen Wade H. Haislip, G-1, for CofS, 29 Apr 41. G-1/15839-10. Also in WA 320 (5-29-41) DRB AGO; Holm, 22.

status, in support of its masculine space. As debate behind closed doors dragged on, the war continued to intensify. By late 1941, Marshall began slowly succumbing to the idea.

On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese heavily attacked military installations on Oahu, which resulted in the sinking of eighteen warships and 164 aircraft completely destroyed. Above all, an estimated 2,400 American civilians lost their lives. The United States was placed in a devastating position, leaving no room for isolation. Thousands of Americans were called forth to manifest their patriotism in a physical devotion to their country. Thousands of men from all ethnic backgrounds served in the United States Armed Forces. By the end of the war 16 million men and women had served in the military, with an estimated 400,000 deaths.<sup>26</sup>

### **Marching into the Military**

The attack on Oahu marked not only a watershed moment for America's involvement in the war, but it was a turning point for women. With men rushing to defend their country's honor in the front lines, women were called upon to demonstrate their patriotism by supporting the war effort on the home front. Using sexist commentary to denote the difference of military performance if a woman were to join the military, a member of the House of Representatives declared:

I think it is a reflection upon the courageous manhood of the country to pass a law inviting women to join the armed forces in order to win a battle. Take the women into the armed service, who then will do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself? Think of the humiliation! What has become of the manhood of America?

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<sup>26</sup> "National WWII Memorial" <http://www.wwiimemorial.com/> (Accessed February 19, 2014).

Many shared the representative's views. After much opposition to the proposal for a women's corps, the bill was finally approved by President Roosevelt.<sup>27</sup> With the support of President Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, the WAAC Bill was enacted on May 1942 as Public Law 554- 774<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>28</sup> However, the opposition to the bill showed through making it a supplementary force to, but not in, the army. Their auxiliary status limited the benefits and status women were entitled to; they would not be given full military status, receive health benefits, no military ranks, or equal pay as the men in uniform received.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, Congressman Melvin Mass presented H.R. 6807, which would allow women to be *in* the Navy Reserve, rather than establish an auxiliary (also supported by Congresswoman Rogers). The Navy Bill was signed on July 1942 as Public Law 689. Furthermore, the Navy granted their women in the Navy Women's Reserve full military status, unlike the Army. The women in the Navy would be officiated as the WAVES, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, with Mildred McAfee serving as its first Director.

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<sup>27</sup> Holm, 27; Treadwell, 44-45, Roger D. Walker, "Women's Contributions to Victory", 108-109, Rio Grande Historical Collections New Mexico State University Library, 1994, found in *Las Olvidadas*, compiled by Omar Rivera. Treadwell goes in depth using congressional records, commentary, and personal/government correspondence to detail the troublesome trajectory Rogers had to face with the War Department, the Army, and the government.

<sup>28</sup> Marine Corps Women's Reserve Reserve was part of the Navy Reserve law, but they had no acronym. In November, the Coast Guards' women auxiliary, SPARS, would be established. The Army Air Force would have two different auxiliaries known as Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron and Women's Flying Training Detachment, both established in 1942. Both groups were consolidated into the WASPS in August 1943, Women Air Force Service Pilots. For the purpose of my study on ethnic Mexican women from Texas who served in the military, I will only concentrate on the WAACS (WACS).

<sup>29</sup> Holm, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*, 24. This changed in 1943, when they were granted full military status, dropping the auxiliary idea, and maintaining the Women's Army Corps. With the Direction of Oveta Culp Hobby. This became known as the Conversion period.



## WAACS

Despite the ethnic and racial diversity with the military, certain implicit language was used when describing the characteristics of the newly established Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). As a result of prior controversy and heavy reluctance to create space for women in the Armed Forces, Director Oveta Hobby, along with War Department Staff, created strict guidelines regarding the women it would allow to enlist. The WAAC would be an elite unit that engaged those only with 'high moral character', educated, and skilled. This implicitly reflected the socioeconomic structure of society, ultimately recruiting only the White working class women and some minority women. Out of the first group of 440 WAAC, 40 were African American women, precisely ten percent of its mandatory quota for Black enlistees.<sup>30</sup>

By the end of 1942, the WAACs had yet to meet their quota of 25,000 with only 22, 055 total women. With the WAACs beginning to struggle with numbers and recruitment, in the beginning of 1943, Hobby was forced to lower the previously rigorous qualifications for enlistment.<sup>31</sup>

There was mounting evidence that the campaign was not recruiting from wider and more promising areas, but instead was merely scooping up the undesirables who had been previously rejected. One veteran WAAC recruiter described the situation: In 1942 we had crowds of applicants and could pick and choose. By early 1943 these were well picked over, but the quota went up while the applications went down. Many of those whom we now called to duty were those who were acceptable but not quite the best. By March these were almost gone, and we were faced with a choice of accepting women we had previously rejected or of leaving our quotas unfilled.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Treadwell, 590.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 593.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 174

From January 1943 through May 1943, the WAACs had added a total of 47,720 women to their ranks, 44,691 of which were enlisted.<sup>33</sup> Enlistment numbers began to drop soon after as a result from Hobby reinforcing her strict qualifications due to a “Negro problem.”<sup>34</sup> Army officials, specifically Director Hobby, was unsatisfied with the recruitment qualifications because many of the newly recruited Black women were barely meeting minimum educational and testing standards, therefore, not upholding the “elite corps” reputation she was building.<sup>35</sup> In April of 1943, she reinstated the educational qualifications, thereby yielding results reflective of lower educational experiences of women of color and poor Whites.<sup>36</sup> “At the same time The Surgeon General's Office also refused to accept Grades IV and V, low scoring, white women.” The problem of allowing unskilled Black and White women into the WAACs proved “that the Army had few jobs for unskilled and untrainable women of any race, and that to recruit them was invariably ill-advised.” Furthermore, the consequence of restricting requirements decreased the number of enlistments from 11,464 in March to 6, 472 in April.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, after six months of deliberating on the WAACs position within the Army, the women were granted full military status in July 1, 1943. The WAACs dropped the Auxiliary in its name making it Women’s Army Corps (WAC). Between July and September, women were forced to choose between honorable discharge or if they wished

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Table 2, 767

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 593.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.” A Negro training company in this month contained 225 members of whom 192 had no usable military skill. In the same month, the pool of unassignable women contained 180 whites and 776 Negroes.<sup>21</sup> The only available comparison of test scores showed that, of a May 1943 sample, 66 percent of Negro recruits were in the two lowest ACCT groups, IV and V, as against only 15 percent of white recruits: only 6 percent of Negro Wacs were in the two upper brackets. I and II, as against 43 percent of white Wacs.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 593- 595. Treadwell elaborates on the “special problem” regarding Negro women.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

to convert, they would be sworn in as WACs.<sup>38</sup> Director Hobby, who was promoted to Colonel as per the conversion, stated

My feeling is that we don't want them if they don't want to stay in. I would hate to lose a great many but I would rather have a smaller Corps of women who are dedicated to this service. This is something that a woman must want to do if she stays in.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to their new title and military status, WACs would now be entitled to regular Army ranks, equal pay, and health care services.<sup>40</sup> With the new image of the WAC unit, the Army turned previously held negative connotations about women in the service to positive reinforcement for enlisting. Colonel Hobby released a classified bulletin to public relations officers across the country to make sure they presented the WACs in the most positive light in every campaign they were mentioned. The ideas that were supposed to be represented were the following:

1. Wacs [*sic*] are just as feminine as before they enlisted. They gain new poise and charm. They do feminine jobs much like those of civilian women. They have dates and are good friends with Army men.
2. The Women's Army Corps is no longer an experiment. It has public acceptance and prestige. "Present it as a success story." Parents are proud. Requirements are high. Only attractive pictures should appear.
3. Army jobs performed by Wacs [*sic*] are necessary to the war effort. Dramatize the job. Show Wacs [*sic*] working with men. Avoid pictures of kitchen police.
4. "Uncle Sam provides for the welfare of his Army nieces." Emphasize advantages of travel, new friends, medical care, recreation.
5. Adopt an affirmative approach. Don't be on the defensive. The WAC has a right to be proud of its record.<sup>41</sup>

By the end of the war, the WACS had a total of 150, 551 women who had served.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid 219-229. Treadwell details the conversion period. Holm, 53-55.

<sup>39</sup> Treadwell, 219.

<sup>40</sup> Holm, 53-55.

<sup>41</sup> Treadwell, 702.

<sup>42</sup> Treadwell, 767; Meyer, 73.

## *La Mujeres en la Prensa*

### *A Mi Hija Ana Maria*

*Dejaste el hogar, hija adorada  
Por server a tu patria idolatrada  
En esta hora de tragedia y duelo  
Y aunque siempre tu ausencia deploramos  
Tu madre y tus hermanas, te admiramos,  
Y le pedimos por ti la dicha al Cielo.*

*Luchas por una causa noble y santa  
Por una causa digna que levanta  
En un solo latir, los corazones;  
Y triunfaras, hijita, realizaras tu anhelo,*

*Asi nuestra alma se lo pide al Cielo  
En sus plegarnias y santa oraciones.*

*Ve, hijita, a cumplir con tu destino,  
Dios Habra de alumbrarte en el camino  
Que segues con valor en esta hora;  
Y te traera de Nuevo a nuestro hogar  
Donde el amor te ha de aguardar  
De tu doliente madre que te adora.*

### *To My Daughter Ana Maria*

You left home, beloved daughter  
To serve your idolized homeland  
In this hour of tragedy and grief  
although always your absence we deplore  
Your mother and your sisters, we admire you  
And we ask for you to heaven bliss

You fight for a noble and holy cause  
For a worthy cause that lifts  
In a single beat, the hearts  
you will triumph, daughter, will realize your  
desire

Our soul asks the heavens  
In its plegarnias and Holy prayers.

Go, daughter, to fulfill your destiny.  
God will shed light in your way  
*continue with valor during this time*  
and He will bring you back to our home  
Where the love has to wait for you  
From your ailing mother who loves you

-Reyes C. Almanderez, mother of PFC. Ana Maria Almenderez<sup>43</sup>

The WAC comprised women of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. Unfortunately, because the military classified 'Hispanics' as Whites, the precise percentage of women who were of Mexican descent is not known.<sup>44</sup> The rising number of ethnic Mexican

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<sup>43</sup> Reyes C Almanderez, "A Mi Hija Ana Maria," *El Tiempo de Laredo*, March 18, 1945, found in *Las Olvidadas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

<sup>44</sup> Military records of women listed below categorizes them as "White" or "others." Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps*, 589. In her account, Treadwell only refers to minorities as Blacks, American Indians, Japanese American, and Puerto Rican. Mexican Workers and Job Politics during World War II; Zamora, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics During World War II*, 80-81. Zamora explains the lawsuit and civil rights movement that initiates the government to outlaw discrimination against Mexicans. As a result, a bill was passed in June 1943, that would classify Mexicans as White within the census; also known as the Caucasian Race solution.

women who joined the WAACs became detectable in 1943. Newspapers from all over Texas began highlighting the mujeres from their area, which included *The Mission Times*, *The Brownsville Herald*, *San Antonio Light*, *The Laredo Time*, *Valley Evening Monitor* (later on changing its name to the Mcallen *Monitor*), *Notas de Kingsville*, and *La Prensa*. On January 16, 1944, *The Valley Evening Monitor* presented Ernestina G. Olivares who enlisted the earliest of all the women, on November 23, 1942.<sup>45</sup> Olivares was stationed at the second WAC training base in Daytona Beach, Florida, where she was promoted from corporal to technician fourth grade.<sup>46</sup>

*The Monitor*, *Mission Times*, and the *Brownsville Herald* showcased six women who enlisted in the WACS from February 1943 to January 1944.<sup>47</sup> Ethnic Mexican women from Mission, Texas who enlisted in the WACS were Miss Esperanza (Hope) Gomez, Mrs. Felicidad G(omez) McAllen, and Maria Elma Muñoz, the first were sisters.<sup>48</sup> *Las hermanas* were presented as “Mission’s first sister team” in *The Mission Times* (1943) and again in *The Monitor* (1944).<sup>49</sup> Both sisters were employed by Moore Field Base as civil service employees. Hope, 22, enlisted in San Antonio on March 1, 1943 with prior experience as junior technician at the Moore Field Base hospital and stenographer. “She was told that her experience in either phase of work would prove

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<sup>45</sup> Ernestina Olivares, Army serial number A-800159, World War II Enlistment Records ca. 1938-1946, Record Group 64, *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration* (accessed March 16, 014) [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov), Military record has it spelled Olivarez.

<sup>46</sup> *Evening Valley Monitor*, January 16, 1944, pg. 11. Section 2, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

<sup>47</sup> “Sisters Join WAAC’s,” *The Mission Times*, April 2, 1943, pg. 1, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera. Article notes that it had 8 women in WAACs (12 overall in all branches but does not mention them specifically).

<sup>48</sup> Maria Munos, Army serial number A-20422, World War II Enlistment Records ca. 1938-1946, Record Group 64, NARA (accessed March 16, 014) [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov). Her military record has it spelled Maria Elma Munos, and her residence county as Nueces, Texas.

<sup>49</sup> “Sisters Join WAAC’s” *The Mission Times*, Friday, April 2, 1943. Pg. 1; *Valley Evening Monitor*, September 24, 1944, pg. 7, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

valuable in her service.”<sup>50</sup> Her sister, 26 year old Mrs. McAllen, previous work experience was at a tailor shop at the Post Exchange.<sup>51</sup> Another Mission Native, Maria Elma Muñoz, born in 1922, entered the WACS in Fort Sam Houston on August 21, 1944.<sup>52</sup> She served as a medical technician during her time in the service.<sup>53</sup>

More women from the Rio Grande Valley began to be announced as they joined the WACs. The *Brownsville Herald* presented two women from La Feria, Elvia C. Villareal and Alberta Ybarra on February 1943 and Herminia Garza from Brownsville on March 28, 1943<sup>54</sup>. Herminia Garza enlisted in San Antonio, Texas, on February 17, 1943.<sup>55</sup> She arrived in Fort Oglethorpe in March, the WAACS third military training center.<sup>56</sup> “One of thousands of patriotic American women”, Garza underwent a four week training which consisted of “Close Order Drill, Army Supply Procedures, Company Administration, Map Reading and other subjects.”<sup>57</sup> *Las Notas de Kingsville*, November 28, 1944, presented Private Lupe A Garcia along with her two brothers who also served in the service.<sup>58</sup> Since she joined after the conversion period to the WACS, she was stationed in New York. *La Prensa*, also highlighted the enlistment of Lucia Rocamontes

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Maria Munos, Army serial number A-20422, World War II Enlistment Records ca. 1938-1946, Record Group 64, *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration* (accessed March 16, 014) [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov).

<sup>53</sup> “Maria Elma Munoz,” *The Monitor*, January 15, 2000, 2C, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera. Maria Munos, Army serial number A-20422, World War II Enlistment Records ca. 1938-1946, Record Group 64, *The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration* (accessed March 16, 014) [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov). In *The Monitor*, McAllen, TX, born and resided in Texas even though her military record shows her residency during World War II was in Nueces County, TX.

<sup>54</sup> “Port Oglethorpe, Ga” *The Brownsville Herald*, Sunday March 28, 1943, 3, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera; “Se Enlistaron En Las WAACs,” *El Heraldo De Brownsville*, February 26 1943, 7, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

<sup>55</sup> Herminia Garza, Army serial number A-800492, World War II Enlistment Records ca. 1938-1946, Record Group 64, *NARA* (accessed March 16, 014) [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov).

<sup>56</sup> “Port Oglethorpe, Ga” *The Brownsville Herald*, Sunday March 28, 1943, 3, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *Notas de Kingsville*, November 28, 1944, 3, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

de Ramirez from Houston, Texas on April 25, 1943.<sup>59</sup> She was featured along with her two brothers.

Women from San Antonio were highlighted in Spanish and English newspapers, providing coverage to a diverse audience. The *San Antonio Light* newspaper, July 1944 through September 1944, featured seven ethnic Mexican women who joined the WACs. These short features strictly listed the assignments and transfers of PVT. Louise Salinas, PVT. Margaret Rivera, PFC. Estelle Mejia Garza, PVT. Concepcion Alvarado, CPL. Dolores G. Flores, and PVT. Betty Martinez Glueck. Sites of service included Fort McDowell, Arizona; Parsidio, California; Morrison Air Field, Florida; Herrington Air Field, Kansas; Fort Sam Houston, Texas; and Randolph Field, Texas. PFC. Guadalupe Blancarte, born in 1918, was raised in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>60</sup> She enlisted in the WACS on October 20, 1943, and completed her basic training in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.<sup>61</sup> She graduated as an airplane mechanic and was stationed at Cochran Field, Georgia. Blancarte served overseas in England from August 1944 to December 1944, becoming one of countless women to be stationed overseas during the war. She along with scores of women and men witnessed and survived the Buzz Bomb Attacks, where over one million buildings were destroyed, and more than six thousand Londoners were killed.<sup>62</sup> After becoming ill, Blancarte returned to the United States and was hospitalized for six months, and continued her service after her recovery. By the end of her enlistment in December

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<sup>59</sup> "Prestan Sus Servicios en el Ejercito," *La Prensa*, Sunday, April 25, 1943, 3, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

<sup>60</sup> Guadalupe Blancarte, Army serial Number A- 807965, World War II Enlistment Records ca. 1938-1946, Record Group 64, NARA (accessed March 3, 014) [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid; "The Fighting Men of Texas" A History of the Second World War, (Dallas: Historical Publishing Company, 1948) Vol. 2, 728, found in *Las Olvidamas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

<sup>62</sup> Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen, *World War II: The Encyclopedia of the War Years 1941-1945*, dover ed. (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2012), 362.

1946, she served in Ohio, Florida, Michigan, California, and North Carolina<sup>63</sup>. CPL.

Blancarte was honored with the E.T.O Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, and Victory Medal.<sup>64</sup>

Five other *mujeres* from Bexar, Nueces, and Webb County enlisted in the WACS during World War II. Mary L Valfre resided in Bexar County while Herminia D. Holland, Maria Salazar, and Herminia F. Abrego were from Nueces County. Holland enlisted in 1943 six days before Salazar. In August 19, 1944, Faustina C. Peña, from Webb County, enlisted at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. In that same county, in the border town of Laredo, eight more ethnic Mexican women who enlisted in the WACS began making headlines in the *prensa* between July 1944 and November 1945. The *Laredo Times* featured Petra Pulido, Juanita Martinez, Belen Garza Salazar, Andrea Canales, and Josefina Gonzalez Gartling and noted that they all joined the WACs during 1943 to 1944. Manuela Villareal was featured along with four of her brothers; the paper emphasizing her longing to be in the WACs since she was eighteen.

It is clear that a significant number of ethnic Mexican women actively served in the WACS. Furthermore, the range of dates from the collected Newspapers suggest that ethnic Mexican women began joining in 1943 through 1945. I argue that a reason that they joined in at this certain time period because of the lowered requirements needed to qualify for the WACS.<sup>65</sup> Although Treadwell points out that Black enlistees had higher numbers during 1943 because of lowered requirements, I also add that ethnic Mexican

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<sup>63</sup> “The Fighting Men of Texas” A History of the Second World War, (Dallas: Historical Publishing Company, 1948) Vol. 2, 728, found in *Las Olvidadas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> This is not to say that ethnic Mexican women were not qualified, but according to their position in the social caste. Furthermore, according to labor demographics, ethnic Mexicans at this time compromised mostly, not all, of farm labor, unskilled, semi skilled, and semi educated class.



women also benefitted due to the sudden rise of ethnic Mexican women being presented as enlisted WACS in local and regional newspapers. From December 1942, the WAACS had a total of 12,767 women, commissioned and enlisted. The number climbed up to 21,582 in January of 1943, and within the next four months, the total number reached 56,164.<sup>66</sup> The lowered requirements had a significant effect on the total number of women, and women of color in particular who now had an opportunity to serve their country in an institution that was not only a symbol of ultimate patriotism, but offered higher pay than they were previously earning.

The last section focuses on six ethnic Mexican women from Texas who served in the WACS and WAVES to center their lived experiences in the World War II narrative. The stories of these ethnic Mexican women disrupts what has been the dominant White/Black female binary evident in the narrative of women's military participation. Their *testimonios* demonstrate their frequent bypassing of gender, racial, and class boundaries before and during the war.

### **Marching through Borders**

It is estimated that 350,000 women and approximately 500,000 Mexican Americans served in all branches of the military, yet there is no exact number of ethnic Mexican women who enlisted. In addition to living in a patriarchal society in America the women were also expected to subscribe to a 19<sup>th</sup> century sphere of domesticity and femininity. Women of all racial background were expected to take care of the family, children, and tend to the male family members. In joining the military, ethnic Mexican

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<sup>66</sup> Treadwell, Appendix A.

women challenged American society norms, but they resisted, manipulated, and negotiated machismo and gender roles within their culture.

The lived experiences of veterans' Rafaela Esquivel, Felicitas Flores, Maria "Sally" Salazar, Elsie Schaffer Martinez, Concepcion Escobedo, and Emma Hernandez via their interviews reveals the struggles of ethnic Mexican women in the service and place these at the forefront. These women continuously contested and negotiated gender, societal, and cultural norms. Rafaela, Felicitas, Maria, Cocepcion, and Emma Hernandez all came from working class, humble backgrounds. Some of their parents came from Mexico during the Revolution or in the case of Emma, was raised by her aunt and uncle after her parents died at an early age. Their impoverished lifestyles soon became a meager diet involving food rations, white butter, pastas bread, and "only meat on Sundays."<sup>67</sup> It was harder because we didn't have as much as we had before."<sup>68</sup> Parents lost their jobs, pay was less, and they had to relocate to a much smaller residence. "We had a nice house before depression, indoor plumbing, furniture... after, we moved to a smaller place."<sup>69</sup> Concepcion describes her reduced style of living in a two 1/2 room home which no indoor plumbing, no sink, no gas stove instead a wooden stove.<sup>70</sup> Elsie, on the other hand, prospered a bit more. Her family did fairly well from a small business her mother had opened before the war.

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<sup>67</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003, Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Although WAC statistics state that twenty-four percent of their enlistees did not graduate high school most of these women received a high school diploma before enlisting in the military, within the forty-one percent bracket.<sup>71</sup> Although they were unable to finish high school, Felicitas and Maria received some high school education.<sup>72</sup> Felicitas dropped out in tenth grade to join the workforce and Maria went through an early teen pregnancy at the age of 16. Emma went on to finish high school, along with Elsie and Concepcion. Concepcion's mother then resisted her father's *machismo* attitude by getting a job outside the home to afford school supplies for her children. Although they all expressed love for their education, Elsie was indifferent to her classes in public school. She "didn't enjoy school" and did not enjoy her required classes, and instead opted for home schooling where she customized her coursework to fit her interest in business and accounting.

Rafaela on the other hand, had a more supportive father who did not allow her to work during her high school years so she could concentrate on her education. However, after she graduated, he confronted her regarding her future goals, "What do you plan to do?" With the motivation to develop a certain future, she walked two miles to town, the same distance she walked every day to school to get information on nursing school. When she returned to inform her father of the financial and clothing requirements, he immediately went into town and acquired loans to pay for her admittance to Robert B. Green School of Nursing.<sup>73</sup> In addition to

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<sup>71</sup> Treadwell, 766.

<sup>72</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nicole Muñoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. Felicitas Flores, interview by Paul Zepeda, video recording, 2 Mar. 2002, Folder 183 VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. Felicitas received her GED after retirement; Maria came back after the war to finish high school and went on to college.

<sup>73</sup> Rafaela Esquivel, interview by Joanne Sanchez, video recording, 12 April 2001, pre-interview information form, 2, Folder 29, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

her tuition, he also opened an account with their department clothing store, Juscus, to buy her the garments needed for her uniform. Rafaela remembers this day fondly as “a happy day.”

All the women expressed mostly positive experiences in their school days. They did not face segregation or much of a hostile environment in school facilities, because “Anglos stuck together, Hispanics stuck together.”<sup>74</sup> However, Concepcion remembers one Anglo teacher who took her out of class and assigned her a low grade on her paper for not paying attention. “It was the way she talked to me, treated me... I felt it was [cus] [*sic*] I was Mexican.”<sup>75</sup> Although they did not recall any racial discrimination from other children, they were all discouraged from speaking Spanish within their academic setting. Later, their Spanish language played a crucial role during their time in the military.

### **“I Went Anyway”**

Although patriotism was sweeping across the country like wildfire and a man’s manhood was predicated upon serving their country on the battlefield, women were expected to cheer their boys on the sideline. They were expected to donate their time and express their loyalty to their country within their domestic and feminine spaces. Women who joined the service were vulnerable to criticism from the mass public, contrary to the Hobby’s concept of an elite corps of educated, skilled women with high moral. People believed “you would be messing around with men or whatever,” recalls Concepcion. “It was just not a good idea.” By joining the armed forces, women risked being seen as sexual deviants, unfeminine, and lesbians which was in opposition to their socially constructed gender norms. Furthermore, this was a critical factor of resistance among Mexican families, especially the father.

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<sup>74</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003. Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

In Mexican culture, a women's femininity, behavior, and choices affected the reputation of the family name; which was directly connected to a father's pride. To have a daughter who stepped out of her domestic space and into one of the most powerful, masculine institutions was to challenge social and cultural norms. Concepcion, Elsie, Emmy, and Maria remember encountering opposition, stemming from cultural expectations. In Mexican society, a women was expected to live at home until she married, as reiterated by Elsie's mother and grandmother.

Despite fathers' and mothers' disapproval, these women felt a sense of patriotism and duty to their country. Concepcion exercised her patriotism by volunteering as Air Raid Warden of her neighborhood, before she joined the service. "We would have practices...and I would have to go down the street and make sure everyone turned off their lights."<sup>76</sup> She recalls her fascination with the military since her high school days, as she would see some of her male classmates leave to serve their country. *Familia* was crucial to Mexican culture, placing personal, blood relationship before anything else. "I joined because of my brothers."<sup>77</sup> Emma and Rafaela remember their brothers, cousins, and other family members who joined the military. Their devotion to their country in the military sector influenced their decision in enlisting in the WACs.

The ethnic Mexican women were also captivated by recruitment advertisements. Felicitas recalled getting "off the bus and Uncle Sam said I need you and I went in there and I applied."<sup>78</sup> Common with the Mexican American generation of World War II, the majority women were fascinated by the idea of leaving their childhood communities and travelling outside their region,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Emma Hernandez, interview by Gary Villareal, video recording, 1 July 2002, Folder 92, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>78</sup> Felicitas Flores, interview by Paul Zepeda, video recording, 2 Mar. 2002, Folder 183 VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

state, and country. "They put a pretty picture of travelling in the US."<sup>79</sup> Maria remembers the enthusiastic reaction of her and friends, ""We were not used to that! Let's go! Let's go!"<sup>80</sup>

However, their parents were in no means excited to see their daughters join.

When Concepcion found out women were going to be utilized in the corps, she attended a recruitment rally. She went home and announced her decision to join the service. Concepcion's mother denounced her patriotic effort by stating she was "too young."<sup>81</sup> Her mother would argue that she "might not know how to behave when you're on your own."<sup>82</sup> After much deliberation, Concepcion found a way to manipulate her mother into signing for her; she requested assignment near home, in Randolph Field.<sup>83</sup>

Maria "Sally" Esquivel did not give a chance for her parents to weigh in on her decision to join the service. "The war in '41 woke us up, and everybody was talking about it, and we all wanted to go and [uh] our parents were against it but I went anyway."<sup>84</sup> Attracted by travelling opportunities with the service, Maria ran off to San Antonio with her friends. She fabricated a story, telling her parents she was visiting her sister closest to her. Meanwhile she registered at the San Antonio recruiting station, using her older sister's birth certificate. At 19, she was a year shy of enlistment, so she enlisted under her sister's identity. She chuckled at the recollection of the FBI as they examined and investigated her identification card, but ultimately found nothing wrong with it. She returned home with no suspicion.

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<sup>79</sup> María Salazar, interviewed by Nicole Muñoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002. Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003, Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> María Salazar, interviewed by Nicole Muñoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002. Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Her secret surfaced when the mailman delivered her letter of acceptance to the WACs. Confused, her father asked, "what is this?" Maria recalls, "and I kept quiet; I didn't know what he was going to do." She was forced to expose her trip to the recruiting station. Her deceit did not sit well with her father who reacted harshly to his daughter's choice in military service. "I'm going to report this and you cannot go! And this and that! And my mother says "look she went with Emilia's birth certificate and she might get in trouble. Don't report her." Because of her mother's pleas, "he didn't report me" but she remembers him angrily leaving the home for the rest of the night. She outright resisted patriarchal culture.

When it came to joining the armed forces, all but Rafaela's parents, initially did not approve their daughters wanting to enter the service. She said her mother was always confident in her decisions and only reacted by saying "if you know you're right go ahead."<sup>85</sup> With *consejo y cariño*, her mother would "would always say be careful and may God bless you."<sup>86</sup> Perhaps Rafaela's early departure from home to enter nursing school had an impact on her parents approving demeanor of her plan to join the service.

The ethnic Mexican women who joined the WACS were stationed in either three of the WACS bases located in Fort Des Moines, Iowa (first center), Daytona Beach, Florida (second center), and Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia (third center). Emma was the only one training in Hunter College, New York, at all training bases, they experienced a four week training "designed to prepare her to step into an Army now held by an able-bodied male soldier who will thereby be released for duty on the fighting fronts."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Rafaela Esquivel, interview by Joanne Sanchez, video recording, 12 April 2001, Folder 29, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> "Port Oglethorpe, Ga," *The Brownsville Herald*, March 28, 1943, 3, found in *Las Olvidadas* compiled by Omar Rivera.

The women underwent a strict six week training, in which they started their day at 5:30 am. Aside from outdoor drills and exercise, they were expected to “make bed[s], chores, clean latrines, sweep, mop, kitchen patrol...”<sup>88</sup> Concepcion recalled her superiors bouncing a quarter off her bed used to make sure her bed was made properly.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Elsie “didn’t like monthly expectations.”<sup>90</sup> Concepcion “would get nervous... They would yell at you as if you can’t hear.”<sup>91</sup> Their rigorous training or harsh superiors did not diminish their enjoyment in the service.

Although all of them were the only ethnic Mexican women in their squadrons, they repeatedly stated that this had no effect on their time in the service. Emma recalled “Blacks have own barracks, own thing, that’s the only thing” but “as far as being a Latina, I had no problem.”<sup>92</sup> The women all spoke with positivity when they discussed their experience with other White women. “I was never treated badly that I could remember. We were all the same.”<sup>93</sup> Concepcion felt isolated at times but it did not affect her much. Felicitas enjoyed being surrounded by women from all over the country. She credited her involvement growing up in the

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<sup>88</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003, Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Elsie Schaffer Martinez, interviewed by Raquel C. Garza, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 384, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>91</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003, Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>92</sup> Emma Hernandez, interview by Gary Villareal, video recording, 1 July 2002, Folder 92, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>93</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003, Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.



Methodist church that prepared her to get along with the girls in the service. They “put in my head I was American and to get along with people from other cultures.”<sup>94</sup>

The women were assigned to different positions within their squadron. Concepcion started as a file clerk, but after constant problems with her headaches and vision, she asked to be transferred to baking for her squadron. Like Concepcion, Felicitas worked clerical for the quartermaster for eight months before going back home to Houston. During her two years in the WAVES, Emma was in charge of logging air flight hours from planes arriving from Central American and South America. “My job was an office job and it was not all that interesting at the time to me. But it’s interesting to me now that I remember about it.”<sup>95</sup>

Elsie was stationed at a base in Arkansas where she remembers Japanese Americans being held there, but “they had everything, they had doctors...”<sup>96</sup> Elsie occupied a high security job in a photographic lab. She was in charge of developing photos taken from soldiers who “take the pictures from all over.”<sup>97</sup> She had to enlarge the pictures and made maps out of them. She knew where the pictures came from but the commander “make us swear that how they were taken from and where they come from.”<sup>98</sup> Elsie remembered her assignment in which she took pictures of incoming patients at the hospital. Her duty to document everyone that came in the hospital and having to develop pictures taken by soldiers overseas bring back gruesome

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<sup>94</sup> Felicitas Flores, interview by Paul Zepeda, video recording, 2 Mar. 2002, Folder 183 VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>95</sup> Emma Hernandez, interview by Gary Villareal, video recording, 1 July 2002, Folder 92, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>96</sup> Elsie Schaffer Martinez, interviewed by Raquel C. Garza, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 384, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

memories. “The Japanese, they were awful, they were mean... They did awful things to the boys and the nurses. I don’t like to remember what I saw in the base, in the hospital.”<sup>99</sup>

**“Even the Men Jumped the River”<sup>100</sup>**

Maria and Rafaela both volunteered to serve overseas. When she recalled the recruiting ads that painted a pretty picture of traveling opportunity with the WACs, Maria exclaimed “But it didn’t happen that way... We were stuck in the jungle for a year and a half!”<sup>101</sup> Maria assisted in the medical field, in the Office of the General Surgeon. She immediately seized the opportunity to serve outside her country. “Well I just feel that I did something caus’ a lot of them wouldn’t go, even the man jumped the river!”<sup>102</sup> Maria referred to men who avoided getting drafted, including some, in regards to the ethnic Mexican men in her hometown of Laredo, who crossed the border to Mexico. In order to help with catastrophic effects of the Invasion, Maria was stationed in New Guinea and soon after, the Philippines. “I had no intentions of going to the Pacific, but I ended up there.”<sup>103</sup>

The stress of the numerous atrocities and physical traumas witnessed in the hospitals took a negative toll on Maria. “We had no choice, we couldn’t get out... I don’t remember that I was trying to get out of it... others did. I just took it as it came.”<sup>104</sup> Dealing with depression and malnutrition worsened her health. She was hospitalized in Manila with dysentery, malaria, and hepatitis.<sup>105</sup> With no improvements to her conditions, she was shipped back to Washington,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> María Salazar, interviewed by Nicole Muñoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002. Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> “Maria Sally Salazar”, form, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA. Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

where she spent six months recovering from five war-related illnesses. “When we went overseas we were stuck in the hospital and when we came back we were still in the hospital.”<sup>106</sup>

Rafaela served as a nurse in four different bases before volunteering to go overseas. She landed in Scotland on December of 1945, and had to endure a night’s trip in the freezing cold, that was only “supposed to take thirty minutes.”<sup>107</sup> By the time they made it to the 242<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, Camp Foaab, in Sissone, France she was so cold that she placed her hand over the stove and without even feeling it, burned her hand. Throughout the cold weather, she and her friends would burn trash and random material to keep warm, including a curtain her mom had sent.

From January through March 1945, she was assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Evacuation Hospital in Luxembourg, five mile from Patton’s Third Army. She was transferred to Laahersee, Germany, where she worked in the receiving area of the hospital. She witnessed the admittance of American soldiers, civilians, girls and boys, and German soldiers. She recalled two German soldiers who were admitted with stomach wounds. In order to pump out infections and harsh chemicals, they had tubes inserted directly to the stomach. One of the soldiers kept getting up throughout the night to take out his tubes, and forcibly taking out his comrade’s. “I guess he didn’t want to be taken prisoner.”<sup>108</sup> They both died the next day. Rafaela was finally discharge in January of 1946.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nikki Munoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>107</sup> Rafaela Esquivel, interview by Joanne Sanchez, video recording, 12 April 2001, Folder 29, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Rafaela Esquivel, pre interview form, 6, Folder 29, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

## “It Takes Guts”

Ethnic Mexican women were enclosed within social and cultural structures of gender roles. For a women to join the military, was to go against their femininity, patriarchal structure, and to challenge masculinity in its entirety. In the narratives of Rafaela, Emma, Maria, Elsie, Concepcion, and Felicitas, agency of negotiation and resistance was enacted through their participation in the military.

Concepcion negotiated with her mother, enlisting but requesting an assignment close to home. While Maria outright resisted the patriarchal structure, enlisting without her parents’ consent. Although they were the only ‘Hispanic’ girls in their units, they did not face any opposition. “Nobody made me look different, no one called me Mexican.”<sup>110</sup> Emma briefly mentioned “they would make remarks here and there, but I’d just ignore...problems that didn’t amount to anything. Thank God for that.”<sup>111</sup>

During wartime, society continuously labeled those women who entered the military service as “lesbian” or too manly. “The formation of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in May 1942, crystallized public fears that the mobilization of women for war would undermine the established sex/gender system and both men and women’s place within it.”<sup>112</sup> Aware of the negativity surrounding the symbolism of joining, the women displayed agency by still choosing to enlist. “I didn’t care what people said.”<sup>113</sup> Emma stated, “I know in my day

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<sup>110</sup> Felicitas Flores, interview by Paul Zepeda, video recording, 2 Mar. 2002, Folder 183 VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>111</sup> Emma Hernandez, interview by Gary Villareal, video recording, 1 July 2002, Folder 92, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>112</sup> Meyer, 2.

<sup>113</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003, Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

people didn't think too much or too hot, I'd say, of women in the service. But we went in there for a purpose. To serve our country, but a lot of people didn't understand that..."<sup>114</sup>

Rafaela and Maria broke through gendered expectations of women in the military by volunteering overseas. "I was there in a strong world war... I think I did something good. I put my life on the line for all of you."<sup>115</sup> Their willingness to serve in such life risking locations reveals that courage and patriotism has no gender. Elsie, employed in a high security job, is still haunted by images she developed but maintains her oath to secrecy. "You learn to keep things to yourself, and learn to forget about them."<sup>116</sup>

A few of these women still endure health complications related to their time in the service. Elsie has been attending Veterans Clinics since her discharge due to the chemicals she was exposed to in the photo lab. As a result from a hard fall in the lab, she has also suffered a back and leg problems. She spent three months in a Corpus Christi hospital to receive treatment, but was never told what was wrong with her. Maria speaks openly about her depression and war related illnesses that she still deals with on a daily basis.<sup>117</sup> In addition to health issues, she took an emotional blow when she came back to the states. While she was recovering in the hospital, her mother suffered from lung complications and died soon after her return home. But no matter the emotional and health complication she had to endure, she kept moving forward. "I was strong enough to live with it, until this day I am still suffering."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Emma Hernandez, interview by Gary Villareal, video recording, 1 July 2002, Folder 92, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>115</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nikki Munoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>116</sup> Elsie Schaffer Martinez, interviewed by Raquel C. Garza, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 384, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>117</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nikki Munoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

Even through the complications, the ethnic Mexican women all credit their time in the service for the discipline they received. “The most important thing that I learned I have kept with me and I will have it with me until I die, Discipline that I learned there. You cannot get that anywhere else but there. And it’s given me many things to think about.”<sup>119</sup> They asserted that the discipline stuck with them the rest of their lives.

These women went on to receive numerous honors, including the Victory Medal, Good Conduct Medal, the Northern France E.T.O Ribbon. Still, some of these women still did not recognize their extraordinary war time service. Rafaela described how “sometimes my sister says that I should feel proud but I never thought about it that way. I just thought it was something I wanted to do and I did. And it’s okay...And then when someone starts talking about it, I kinda feel embarrassed.”<sup>120</sup> In similar manner, Emma boldly stated, “I didn’t do anything to help the war. I don’t feel like I did anything except be in the service. But I learned a lot.”<sup>121</sup>

Instead of adding value to her service in the military, Elsie turned attention to the people in the home front. “The people that stayed outside of the army suffered too. Because we got the best of food. We got the best of everything. And they have to buy with their stamps to have enough for them to eat.”<sup>122</sup>

Rafaela, Emma, Maria, Elsie, Concepcion, and Felicitas symbolize fierce, courageous, and selfless individuals who devoted to their country in time of war. Whether consciously, or

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<sup>119</sup>Emma Hernandez, interview by Gary Villareal, video recording, 1 July 2002, Folder 92, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>120</sup>Rafaela Esquivel, interview by Joanne Sanchez, video recording, 12 April 2001, Folder 29, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>121</sup>Emma Hernandez, interview by Gary Villareal, video recording, 1 July 2002, Folder 92, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>122</sup>Elsie Schaffer Martinez, interviewed by Raquel C. Garza, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 384, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

subconsciously, contributing to radical agency. "I'm not asking my country for more than they can give me, I give to my country what I can."<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER V

### “EVERYONE PITCHED IN”: ETHNIC MEXICAN WOMEN COLLECTING METAL, WRITING LETTERS, MENDING HEARTS

I would give my all for my country, because it's not the country that's important,  
it's the people in it.

SALLIE CASTRO<sup>1</sup>

In the attempts to insert the Chicana/o narrative in the World War II historiography, the attention of the “Mexican American generation,” as coined by Mario T. Garcia, has concentrated on the contributions of the male soldier, the male and *pachuco*. Until recently the research efforts of Elizabeth Escobedo, Naomi Quinonez, and Patricia Portales has shed light on the Mexican American female workers in California. Along with their groundbreaking works, Catherine S. Ramirez, has focused her research on the *pachuco* lifestyle through a gendered lens, focusing on the Pachuca women from World War II to the Chicana/Chicano movement. In order to break away from common institutional and employment contributions that men and women have made to World War II, I shed light on the involvement of Ethnic Mexican women to World War II through their collective and individual actions and devotion to their country.

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<sup>1</sup> Sallie Castro, interviewed by Nicole Griffith, video recording, 1 March 2001, Folder 22, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.



This chapter will highlight the experiences of sixteen ethnic Mexican women who stayed on the home front and supported their country in significant ways that is commonly marginalized in the war efforts. Ethnic Mexican women collected tin, scrap metal, bought war bonds, joined the USO, wrote letters, among other things. Their patriotism not only shined through their willingness to serve their country in any way they could, but also in the spirit of maintaining their duties within their familial and domestic space. The ability of these ethnic Mexican women to converge their civic, familial, and nation's obligations exhibit a divine strength and loyalty to their families, community, and nation.

The women not only dealt with the constant worrying for the safety of their loved ones in the battlefield, but they fought their own battles in their daily social and domestic spheres. Because of the ethnic Mexican women's socially constructed inferior racial/ethnic, and gendered status in American society, they dealt with harsh treatment and unequal opportunities in their academic institutions, employment positions, and communities. The women were expected to abide by prescribed gendered roles and also had to deal with patriarchal and racial dynamics that constantly limited their daily lives and aspirations. Throughout the war, the women found themselves resisting, negotiating, and accommodating to the patriarchal control within their familial and social structures, while combatting racial discrimination in the public spaces.

Even through the women's wartime racial, gender, and economic struggles, they maintained their dedication to their loved ones at war. Their devotion to family and country demonstrated courage beyond any immeasurable standards of commitment and inner strength. The experiences and contributions of ethnic Mexican women during the war shaped their identity and fostered a strengthened consciousness.

Most of the women were all born between the years of 1924 and 1932, except for two of the women who were born in 1918, and one in 1919. Their location of birth and wartime residence are spread throughout Texas; Buda, Austin, Bertram, McAllen, San Marcos, Guerra, La Feria, Bastrop, Lockhart, San Diego, Laredo, and Fall City. While the majority of the women were born in Texas, Aurora Orozco, mother of historian Cynthia Orozco and author of *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, was born in Nuevo Leon, Mexico. She was four years old when her family relocated to Mercedes, Texas. All of the women's grandparents or parents moved their families from Mexico, making these particular women first and second generation Americans. Their generational status, however, did not deter or affect the effort they put forth.

When Aurora's family first moved from Mexico in 1922, they "were very excited they were coming to the United States."<sup>2</sup> Her father had been a bookkeeper for *La Fundacion*, an American gold, silver, and coal mining company stationed in Nuevo Leon. However, with the political turmoil between the United States and Mexico, Pancho Villa sabotaged the company. The constant troubles with Mexico's rebellious and revolutionary figure, ultimately led them to shut down the company. Aurora's father was then offered a position with the same company in Mercedes, Texas, which brought their family north of the Texas/Mexico border. After her move, Aurora described the "cultural shock" she experienced with their family's declined financial income "and we didn't know how to speak English."<sup>3</sup> Aurora's language barrier would force her family to pay for her admittance to a private Mexican school until she could learn to read and write, so it would be easier for her to translate.

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<sup>2</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Although most of the women were still very young during the Great Depression, they remembered their experiences as financially strained yet, they were not ungrateful. Elizabeth Garcia remembered the milk, rice, and dried fruit that her parents and neighbors were provided by the relief. Some of their parents would cross over to Mexico to attain supplies or food that was otherwise not available to them in the United States. But even then, they barely had enough money for extra essentials.

Others, like Vikki Guerrero of the Rio Grande Valley, worked in the fields alongside her family, harvesting spinach, potatoes, carrots, and cotton.<sup>4</sup> Linda Estrada also joined their family in farm labor. Linda was placed in a unique position of being the family's accountant. In addition to picking cotton, she was given the responsibility of logging in the amount of hours worked and pounds of cotton picked since she was the only educated family member. Linda became the informant and communicator between her father and uncles and the land owner, because she knew her English well. For every one hundred pounds of cotton they picked, they were only paid one dollar, making Linda's position crucial to their economic survival. She proudly recalled the value her education, language, and bookkeeping brought to the family's monies, because the boss knew he could not cheat her. "It was hard to work out in the sun... We were very poor but very happy because we shared each other."<sup>5</sup>

Aurora, also from the Rio Grande Valley region picked cotton with her brothers and sisters at ten years old. Aurora recalled the White, homeless people who wandered from place to place, jumping on trains, to ask for food. "Even the white people from the northern states used

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<sup>4</sup>Victoria Guerrero, interviewed by Elizabeth Aguirre, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 266, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. Her name is shown as Victoria on file, but prefers Vikki.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

to come down to the Valley and they used to come to the neighborhood...asking for food.”<sup>6</sup>

Since they often stopped by the Mexican barrios, Aurora stated they were given the nickname “trampas” by her community.<sup>7</sup>

Theresa Casarez’s mother, like Aurora’s community, would aid those in need, even though they barely survived on what they had. Theresa’s father worked in a cannery for the WPA, canning meat to give to unemployed individuals during the Depression. While her father worked, her mother stayed at home, tending to her family’s well-being. Aurora’s mother sewed outfits for her children, and also mended used clothing for the homeless to reuse. She recalled, “My mother never, never sent anyone away without giving them the little bit that we had. She was always sewing things and mending... [incase] anyone came by the house that needed clothing.”<sup>8</sup> Along with Theresa, Sallie’s mother would help care for newborn babies and mothers after they gave birth. Both mothers’ generosity clearly extended beyond her family and into her community.

Placida Barrera, from Guerra, particularly remembered that “the county commissioner would hold back relief goods because it wasn’t profitable for the stores in town. We really didn’t receive too much help from anything or anyone.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, she helped her father plant corn, pumpkin, squash, and watermelon, but recalled sometimes not having enough water to keep their crops growing. Her family meals consisted of beans and rice, and sometimes a little meat if they

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<sup>6</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Theresa Casarez, “Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers”, *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001, Interviewed 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>9</sup> Placida Barrera, “Texas Girl Traveled World as Air Force Wife”, *Narratives*, by Emily Burgess, Spring 2003, Interviewed by Virgilio Roel, 28 Sept. 2002. Folder 236, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

were lucky. She recalled the postage stamps costing three cents, coffee was ten cents per pound, and the average working wage was twenty five cents per hour.<sup>10</sup> Sadly, Placida's family home was destroyed by a hurricane in 1933, forcing them to relocate to the Mission, Texas. "It was a really strange life back then, especially during the Depression... it was a hard life, but we never did without."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to coping with their family's financial crisis, the women faced racial discrimination in school and public places. Martha Vidaurri of Austin, recalled her mother constantly washed their clothing so "nobody will be calling you dirty Mexicans."<sup>12</sup> When Aurora was finally transferred to public school, she recalled the ethnic Mexican kids not being given lunch tickets as her Anglo counterparts were. The ethnic Mexican students, including herself, took home cooked meals, which usually consisted of *taquitos*. The Anglo students made fun of them, embarrassing them and marginalizing her and her friends to the corner of the cafeteria. "And then sometimes, in those times, everybody was so poor, sometimes we didn't even have anything at the house to eat. So we didn't take anything to school."<sup>13</sup>

In Lockhart, Texas, Gregoria Acosta recalled the extreme segregation faced by the diverse population. The town had three schools which were designated for African American

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<sup>10</sup> Placida Barrera, interview index, page 2, Folder 236, Folder 236, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>11</sup> Placida Barrera, *Narratives*, by Emily Burgess, Spring 2003, interviewed by Virgilio Roel, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 236, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>12</sup> Martha Vidaurri, interviewed by Tammy Greis, interview index, page 3, reviewed by Joanne R. Sanchez, 13 Sept. 2003. Folder 161 VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>13</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

students, Latinos, and Whites, separately.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Linda also recalled the ethnic Mexican student population was forced to attend schools in Taylor and Hutto because they were not allowed in Bastrop's only high school. The school was finally integrated when she entered the ninth grade. She credited the integration to a White, male teacher, married to an ethnic Mexican woman, who stood up for them.<sup>15</sup>

Herminia Cadena, who moved from Fall City to Mercedes, recalled the segregation she faced in the Texas school. The teacher eventually changed Herminia's name to Minnie because she was not able to pronounce it. This would be a constant disturbance throughout her school years so she made sure to spell out her full name in every form. Segregation was not the only form of discrimination, Herminia encountered. Her native tongue was not allowed to be spoken in school, which got her, and other Spanish speakers, punished. If the ethnic Mexican students were caught speaking Spanish during recess, the teachers would make them sit in the corner of the playground where snakes and other insects reproduced and populated. She would eventually move to Michigan where she would attend her first integrated public school.<sup>16</sup>

In Austin, Elizabeth Garcia's working class father placed his children, both male and females, in Guadalupe Catholic School. The school was segregated and designated only for ethnic Mexican students. Although all students were of Mexican origin, like Herminia, Elizabeth was also punished if she dared speak Spanish in school. Despite the segregation and harsh treatment towards their children, Elizabeth's father had to pay for their attendance. The price did

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<sup>14</sup> Gregoria Acosta Esquivel, "Wounded soldiers inspired girl to become nurse," *Narratives*, by Lauren Slaughenhoupt, Spring 2003, interviewed by Laura Rivera, 1 Nov. 2002, Folder 254, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Estrada, interviewed by Gloria Monita, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 360, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>16</sup> Herminia Cadena, interviewed by Ismael Martinez, 2 Jan. 2004, Folder 334, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

not matter for her parents because they valued the importance of the strict instruction and education they provided. Her father felt it necessary for his boys to learn how to respect women and future wives, and the girls to prepare for marriage.<sup>17</sup>

In Austin, Theresa and Sallie faced discrimination in the predominantly Anglo campus of Austin High School. Although there was no outright hostility between the students, Theresa affirmed that the few ethnic Mexican kids that attended “got stuck together... we didn’t even think of mixing.”<sup>18</sup> Theresa additionally stated that students had to be invited to participate in school organizations. Ethnic Mexicans were not allowed to be part of the “Red Dragons” or “Red Jackets” which was the Drama Club, both affirmed by Theresa and Sallie. “We couldn’t do anything, no matter how talented you were.”<sup>19</sup> Sallie sadly recalled an incident of racial discrimination in which the “White kids” parents got involved. After an ethnic Mexican boy made the “all White” varsity football team, the parents of the protested the integration, and had him removed. Sallie recalled being part of the Hispanic club in which they learned dances and presented shows for other students, teachers, and parents. However, the students involved began to resent their positions, feeling that they were being exploited to entertain Anglo people. She eventually left the club. Theresa, however, broke racial grounds when she became the only ethnic Mexican to be part of the Glee Club. The discrimination Sallie faced during her school

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Garcia, “Haunted by war, Garcias rebuild life,” *Narratives*, written and interviewed by Hannah McIntyre, Spring 2000, Folder 38, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>18</sup> Theresa Casarez, “Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers,” *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001, interviewed 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>19</sup> Sallie Castro, interviewed by Nicole Griffith, video recording, 1 March 2001, Folder 22, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

years remained engrained. She stated that she was constantly isolated, and felt left out; “It stays with you for the rest of your life.”<sup>20</sup>

As Linda affirmed, evident in the high school experience of Theresa and Sallie with the parent’s protest in Austin High school, that the parents were at fault for the discriminatory practices. “You see, it’s the parents (who wanted segregation), not the kids.... The kids don’t see the difference.”<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the women continuously dealt with explicit and implicit forms of racism in their daily lives.

The discrimination faced in the schools also carried over to public places such as restaurants in New Braunfels, Wharton, and Bastrop. Linda remembered ethnic Mexicans had to go through the back of the entrance, but only for takeout; they were not allowed to sit and dine inside the restaurant. Nonetheless, Linda found ways in which to bypass regulations in the segregated diners. “Sometimes, I played dumb. I would say to myself, ‘well I don’t know how to read your sign’ so I’d go through the front door. And I got waited on for the simple reason that I knew how to speak English.”<sup>22</sup> Theresa was not so lucky, when she and her friends were denied entrance to a dance in Barton Springs.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Linda, Gregoria and Martha accepted the rules applied to ethnic Mexicans in restaurants. Gregoria was not allowed to sit in the best part of a local restaurant, the basement. Although she longed to sit in her preferred section, Gregoria did not defy the rules and instead

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<sup>20</sup> Theresa Casarez, “Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers,” *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001. Interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>21</sup> Linda Estrada, interviewed by Gloria Monita, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 360. VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Theresa Casarez, “Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers,” *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001. Interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.



sat in the back of the restaurant because she felt that was where she was expected to sit. “At the time segregation didn’t bother me. I felt like that’s the way it was supposed to be.”<sup>24</sup> Sallie and her friends were also forced to stand up and eat by the door when they decided to grab a burger at Woolworths.

Although Sallie did not receive or witness equal treatment from her institution and peers, she provided with an unusual act of kindness by her middle school teacher. Throughout her middle school and high school years, one of her teachers paid her five dollars for three to five hours of odd jobs which included watering her plants, washing laundry, cleaning, and other chores. “... If you look back on what people were making, in 1940 and 41, you will see that I was highly overpaid for what I was doing...”<sup>25</sup> Sallie recognized this as an act of compassion the teacher bestowed upon her because she was probably aware of the financial hardships her family faced.

Being from poor working class families, sometimes limited the number of years they were able to attain an education. Gregoria recalled her “grandfather used to say if you’re going to get anywhere, you need to go to school and you need to get your education, know it was hard. A lot of people did finally continue, but some of their parents just didn’t have the necessary things to get them to school, and a lot of the time they had to go to work. They had to quit school to go to work.”<sup>26</sup> Especially with the Depression worsening the economic situation, the children were obligated to aid in the family’s financial well-being. Mary Resendez of Austin

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<sup>24</sup> Gregoria Acosta Esquivel, “Wounded soldiers inspired girl to become nurse,” *Narratives*, by Lauren Slaughenhaupt, Spring 2003, interviewed by Laura Rivera, 1 Nov. 2002, Folder 254, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>25</sup> Sallie Castro, interviewed by Nicole Griffith, video recording, 1 March 2001, Folder 22, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>26</sup> Gregoria Acosta Esquivel, “Wounded soldiers inspired girl to become nurse,” *Narratives*, by Lauren Slaughenhaupt, Spring 2003, interviewed by Laura Rivera, 1 Nov. 2002, Folder 254, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

dropped out in fifth grade to help her mother financially with her seven other siblings. She stated, “That’s the way it was for us- hard work. We didn’t have to go to school... if our parents didn’t send us to school than we didn’t go.”<sup>27</sup>

Gloria Alaniz suffered the loss of a mother at the age of fifteen, in the beginning of the war. At an early age she was forced to take up the responsibility of her seven siblings, one of which suffered of cholera at the time of her mother’s death. Gloria recalled her mother’s request as she lay in her death bed, remaining strong and trying to hide any evidence of fear and sadness. “I started to cry, I thought that because I was going to light a candle she was going to die... she looked in bed like nothing was wrong. She said, don’t be afraid. I am not going to die, just light the candle.”<sup>28</sup> Her mother passed away soon after, but Gloria’s emotional stress intensified as her infant brother’s health deteriorated. “It was at night, and I looked up at the sky, I said, “Jesus, please take him. I don’t think we can take care of him...He’s very sick. Will you take him?”<sup>29</sup> Gloria’s baby brother passed away. She became the mother figure for her siblings, caring for them in sickness, preparing meals, and kept a watchful eye over them. A while later, Gloria’s twelve year old brother contracted tetanus, prompting her to drop out of school to care for him full time, as well as remain attentive to her other siblings. Gloria sacrificed her education, a path that was considered a social accomplishment and a step up the economic and social ladder to care for her siblings. Although Gloria was not the oldest child, she was required and expected to take up the care giver role only because she was the oldest female sibling. The

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Resendez, interviewed by Katherine Hearty, video recording, 28 March 2001, Folder 84, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria Alaniz, interviewed by Yvonne Lim, video recording, 18 Oct. 2003, Folder 313, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

gendered role which Gloria was expected to fulfill, stripped her of her educational opportunities and limited her to the domestic sphere as a young child.

Theresa Casarez and Sallie Castro were two of the only three ethnic Mexicans to graduate from Austin High School in 1945. Sallie credited her educational accomplishments to her older sisters, who all dropped out in the third grade to contribute to their family's finances, but encouraged and insisted that she keep going. They insisted she stay in school, which upset Sallie to some extent, so they bribed her with school outfits. Later on, however, Sallie also quit her second year of her undergraduate year in the University of Texas at Austin to care for her parents who were suffering health complications. Sallie was not the only one who gave up higher education because of familial duties, Placida also made a devastating decision. After graduating Mission High School in 1945, she was offered admittance into A&I, but dropped out after only weeks of attendance to help care for her family. "I cried because I wanted to go to school, but financially, we couldn't afford it. My sister was still in high school and my father was sick, he suffered from M.S."<sup>30</sup>

While these unselfish acts from the women demonstrate a devotion to their families, it also reveals the gendered dynamics within the family structure. Although both male and females were obligated to work in order to help with the financial survival of the family, the females were expected to fulfill the maternal roles of caring for their younger siblings. In addition to Placida, Sallie was the only one out of the women who was able to go straight through high school per the insistence of her older sisters. This in turn also shows the factor that age plays in the assuming of roles. While Sallie was the youngest, and therefore taken care of by her older

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<sup>30</sup> Placida Barrera, *Narratives*, by Emily Burgess, Spring 2003. Interviewed by Virgilio Roel, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 236, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

sister, the other women were not. Nevertheless, all these women were required to drop out of school at one level or another, to assist their families with financial and health issues.

Although some of the youth were not aware of details regarding the start of the war, Aurora remembered her father constantly kept up to date with the news. “There were rumors, you know, about the World War II in Europe, that there was this guy that his name was Hitler, and that he was trying to start a war. And he wanted to conquer the whole world if he could. But especially he was uh after the Jewish people...”<sup>31</sup>

The bombing of Pearl Harbor was announced through radio stations across America. Aurora’s father issued a family gathering to hear President Roosevelt’s speech because “... he was going to talk about the war. So we all sat, you know, around and we heard the President speak about how the United States was going into war...”<sup>32</sup> The heart felt announcement shocked the American people across the country. “...I didn’t really know what war was. I knew it wasn’t good because when Japan attacked at Pearl Harbor, we learned that one of my mom’s friend’s son had been killed.”<sup>33</sup> Churches, such as Linda’s and Mary’s also took responsibility of announcing the attack. “We heard [about the bombing] on a Sunday at church. We just prayed to God that it (the war) wouldn’t come over here. We knew that the country was in war and there was going to be a lot of changes.”<sup>34</sup> The changes that took place affected individuals, families, communities, institutions, and the country.

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<sup>31</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid,

<sup>33</sup> Linda Estrada, interviewed by Gloria Monita, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 360. VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Resendez, interviewed by Katherine Hearty, video recording, 28 March 2001, Folder 84, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

With the announcement of America's entry into the war, thousands of men rushed to serve their country. By the end of the war, an estimated total of 375,000 ethnic Mexicans served in the armed forces.<sup>35</sup> Although the men exuded American patriotism, bravery, and courage, "it was real sad because we knew that... everybody that we knew in our family, in our friends, our neighbors, somebody had young people, or the fathers, and pretty soon, they would be going into war."<sup>36</sup> Their men were soon called to action, leading the women into train stations to say goodbye to their boys. Aurora remembered the morose atmosphere that lingered over her town for they missed their boys. Celebrations and holidays ceased; "we didn't have fiestas anymore."<sup>37</sup> The window sills of families displayed an American flag with a star for each soldier they had serving overseas, as Herminia and Theresa's family did.

As their boys left their hometowns to a dangerous world unknown to them, the women waited anxiously at home for any news update. "You live on a continual 'what's going to happen?' you can't relax. Every time the phone would ring, I would jump sky high."<sup>38</sup> The women recalled the importance of the radio to their everyday lives. The radio served as the daily informant of war updates, but also conducted as a form of sanity for the family members of those who served in the battlefields. Vikki recalled her family's anticipation by the radio to keep informed of any updates. "We prayed for peace; we prayed night and day."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in the United States* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 103.

<sup>36</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Jean Avalos, "Two against the world: 'mixed raced' couples were rare in the 40s but the Avaloses found happiness together," *Narrative*, interviewed and written by Karin Brulliard, 15 Oct, 2003 & 4 Nov. 2003, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin. Folder 322, VOCES OHPA.

<sup>39</sup> Victoria Guerrero, interviewed by Elizabeth Aguirre, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 266, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

The women also began to rely on newspapers, such as the *Brownsville Herald*, *La Prensa*, *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, and *San Antonio Light* just to name a few. The newspapers, such as the *Brownsville Herald* as Aurora recalled, would highlight the men who were leaving their hometown to serve in the Armed Forces. She remembered fondly, the feature of Miguel Gonzales, a neighbor, who became the town's first killed in action during the "La Invasion"; the invasion of Normandy. Again, another one of the ethnic Mexican women served as the correspondent between an English-filled news, and her Spanish speaking family and neighbors. During the war, Gregoria was raised by her grandparents, who could not speak or read a lick of English, but needed to stay informed about the war since they had three of their four sons who were serving overseas. Gregoria became the news informant, reading and translating the English newspaper into Spanish for her grandparents and neighbors, who could neither read nor understand English. The only time she recalled regretting her education, was when she broke the news to her grandparents that one of her uncles was injured in Luxembourg.

Theresa recalled her mother "and all the mothers waited for the mail every day" to receive any sign of hope their loved one was still alive.<sup>40</sup> Although grateful to receive letters, she also recalled the censorship regulations that often delayed letters, not allowing for constant communication. The content of the letters was overseen by the government, to make sure the men were not releasing any information on their locations. Gloria remembered the letters "he would write me and words he used in black."<sup>41</sup> She remained unaware of the dangers he personally faced, until he revealed some of them later in life. Although she "didn't know he was

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<sup>40</sup> Theresa Casarez, "Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers," *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001. Interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>41</sup> Gloria Alaniz, interviewed by Yvonne Lim, video recording, 18 Oct. 2003, Folder 313, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

in danger” she “would pray for them,” as so many other families did for their loved in during the war. This encouraged some families to establish informal codes to let their loved ones know of their whereabouts. Santos Fuentes’ husband, Toby, utilized “dishes” to inform her he was stationed in China, while Martha’s brother used states and names of people they knew.<sup>42</sup> When her brother wrote “make sure you tell Doctor Garcia’s youngest daughter I say hello”, he referred to the pastor’s daughter, Virginia, as a code of his stationed location. Later on, he wrote “tell the boys to save me some Mexican beer” which Martha decoded as *Cartablanca*, in other words, that he was stationed in Casablanca.<sup>43</sup>

The fears and anxieties of many families became a reality as they began to receive news of their loved one’s injuries or death. Ascencion Cortez’s husband suffered a severe injury when he attempted to throw out an enemy grenade that was launched in his foxhole. Unfortunately, it exploded as it was released from his hand. Trained as an Army medic served to his advantage, as her husband was forced to give himself aid. He lost his hand.<sup>44</sup>

Vikki Guerrero suffered the loss of two cousins who died in action. One died in a warplane and another died as a result of his tank being attacked, and exploded. Their funeral was held in Brownsville but their caskets were not to be opened, as orders by the government. Vikki recalled the sentries guarding the casket at all times, even during the wake at home, to make sure that they did not open it. This eventually created doubts for who aunt, who

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<sup>42</sup> Santos Fuentes, interviewed by Karla Gonzalez, 13 Oct. 2000, interview index, page 21, Folder 32, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>43</sup> Martha Vidaurri, “Communicating through codes made wartime easier,” *Narratives*, written and interviewed by Tammy Greis, Fall 2001, Folder 161 VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>44</sup> Ascencion Cortez, interview index, 4, Desiree Mata, indexed 1 Feb. 2004, interviewed by Desiree Mata, 25 Oct. 2003, Folder 346, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

questioned if her sons' bodies were even inside the casket. Vikki and her family lived with the uncertainty for the rest of their lives.<sup>45</sup>

While they worried for their loved ones' safety overseas, the women continued to face economic, racial, and gendered struggles on the home front. The women and American people were obligated to abide by a rationing system in which their everyday necessities were limited in order to conserve as much as possible for the soldiers in the battlefield. Just like the Depression, sugar, coffee, meat, nylons, leather, gasoline, shoes, and clothing were rationed. Because the American people "couldn't buy leather shoes" since it was saved for the soldiers, Aurora's father went to Mexico to buy *huaraches*, sandals.<sup>46</sup>

All the women had brothers, lovers, cousins, uncles, or friends who went into the war, except for Sallie who "lucked out" because she had no brothers. However, for Herminia the war affected her on a more personal level, in which she stated that she "didn't recognize the importance of the war until my brother went in."<sup>47</sup> This simple, yet influential, statement rang true to many of the women, and American public. Their loyalty to their loved ones was more than enough to prompt their patriotic spirit into actions. Whether it was collecting tin, writing letters, or babysitting for military officers, these ethnic Mexican women found multiple ways to contribute to the war effort.

Mary's parents' separation during the war required her to get a job to help with the financial situation at home. "They needed a lot of help, so I went to work. They wanted all the

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<sup>45</sup> Victoria Guerrero, interviewed by Elizabeth Aguirre, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 266, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>46</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>47</sup> Gloria Alaniz, interviewed by Yvonne Lim, video recording, 18 Oct. 2003, Folder 313, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.



girls to help.” She began her job at Austin Laundry, pressing and drying civilian clothing as well as military uniforms, which lasted ten years. Gloria dropped out of school to work as a nurse at the McAllen hospital during the war. Placida was employed as a postal clerk at the United States Postal Service. Although she made her wages, she was still paid less than anyone else at the office, and less than the minimum wage.<sup>48</sup> Her wages did not go up until the Post office underwent investigation by government officials.<sup>49</sup> Unlike Gloria and Placida, Herminia and Vikki continued working in the fields of Michigan with her family due to labor shortage during the war. Although their exact field location is unknown, they both worked alongside German POWs in the fields. Vikki described them as “great, big, husky fellows” who wore an imprinted label “POW” to mark them as government captives and distinguish them from the rest of the labor force.<sup>50</sup>

Theresa’s job at a local department store in Austin was affected by the war. She remembered the tooth paste, in particular, because she was required to get the container back before selling it. Since the container was made of metal, the customers were not allowed to take them so they store could recycle them for the war effort; it is assumed that the customer had to take their own mean of packaging the paste. In addition to recycling materials that could be used for war, she was obligated to “get a name and address” from customers who bought a distilled, hazel leaf extract known as Witch Hazel.<sup>51</sup> Witch Hazel was used for medicinal purposes to aid

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<sup>48</sup> Placida Barrera, *Narratives*, by Emily Burgess, Spring 2003. Interviewed by Virgilio Roel, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 236, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Victoria Guerrero, “War delayed marriage for daughter of migrants,” *Narratives*, written by Christa Desimone, Spring 2003, interviewed by Elizabeth Aguirre, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 266, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>51</sup> Theresa Casarez, “Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers,” *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001. Interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

in the treatment of tuberculosis, cancer, diarrhea, inflammation, among countless other infections and sickness. Since the liquid remedy contained alcohol, customers drank it, leading to Theresa's assignment of obtaining customers' information.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the fact that many of these women had entered the workforce at an early age, Aurora still recalled the general negative attitudes American society felt about women working outside the home. She stated that in the Rio Grande Valley, women were not allowed to work citrus packaging warehouse, but were slowly allowed during and after the war.<sup>53</sup> The shortage of men during the war challenged American society to allow women to work outside of their domestic spheres. Aurora and her sisters also took advantage of the wartime necessities and worked various jobs which included stitching uniforms for soldiers and making buttons out of sea shells.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to wage labor, some of the ethnic Mexican women also volunteered their time to the war effort. Theresa, an avid dancer, utilized her love of dancing to entertain the soldiers at Camp Swift in Bastrop, Texas. "We used to go to the university... to Camp Swift, or to the USO to entertain... we did the typical dances, the jarabe tapatia, the zanduga, just about any... dance that was typical at the time... for every dance we did we had a different costume."<sup>55</sup> In addition to her performances that lifted the soldier's spirits, she donated two years of her time during the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>53</sup> Gloria Alaniz, interviewed by Yvonne Lim, video recording, 18 Oct. 2003, Folder 313, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>54</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>54</sup> Gloria Alaniz, interviewed by Yvonne Lim, video recording, 18 Oct. 2003, Folder 313, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>55</sup> Theresa Casarez, "Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers," *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001, interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

war to Margarita Munoz's newspaper, *La Fuerza*.<sup>56</sup> From 1943 to 1945, she volunteered to sell ads for the newspaper, "which published news in Spanish." Her participation in selling advertisements made the magazine's publishing possible, which served as a critical tool that kept Spanish speaking peoples informed about the war. Theresa's mother also contributed to the war in any way she could. Ethnic Mexican families in Austin would reach out to her for the ceremonies. She would hold the wake for fallen soldiers at her house, with the procession followed up at the cemetery.<sup>57</sup>

Some of the women did their part in the war effort by writing letters to the soldiers. Through their words and constant conversations with the soldiers, they provided spiritual lifting, encouragement, and hope. Martha, Theresa, Sallie, and Elizabeth all wrote letters to military men; Theresa clearly remembered the name of the soldier she wrote to in Guam, Pete Casarez.<sup>58</sup> Sallie even created a writing club, Blue Horizon, around the age of fifteen/sixteen to write the soldiers overseas. "Me and a bunch of us got together. We had a club...and we used to, you know, exchange names, somebody you know, and we changed names of the boys that we got names from. Some of them we didn't know we just wrote to them, us to encourage them. And that was our part, our way of doing our part."<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth was also part of an informal gathering of friends who wrote to different soldiers, some who wrote to their husbands, and kept each other updated on the soldier's well-being.

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<sup>56</sup> Theresa Casarez, pre-interview form, page 3, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>57</sup> Theresa Casarez, "Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers," *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001, interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>58</sup> Theresa Casarez, "Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers," *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001. Interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>59</sup> Sallie Castro interviewed by Nicole Griffith, video recording, 1 March 2001, Folder 22, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

At fourteen years old, Mary was actively helping her church recycle tin for the manufacturing of weapons and munitions. “We’d open the [tin] cans on both sides, and then put the lids in the middle of the can and then mash it down. They picked [the cans] up or we took them to church in bags, and somebody would take them.”<sup>60</sup> Linda, Martha, Placida, Sallie collected scrap metal. “There was a lot of collecting tin and things like that you know, doing things for the war effort.”<sup>61</sup> Along with collecting scrap metal and buy war bonds, Linda baby sat for military officers at Camp Swift. Although her mother was hesitant on allowing her daughter to babysit, “Mama said it was okay as long as I returned that same day.”<sup>62</sup>

When the war started, many women married their longtime boyfriends who were off to fight the war, such as Martha. Others rushed to the altar, in essence of the romanticized notion of having a soldier risking their life for them and their country. Placida’s relationship grew through the mail. “He proposed to me my mail, our courtship was by mail and he even sent me the rings by mail.”<sup>63</sup> The war not only challenged gendered dynamics in the domestic and employment spaces, but it allowed for ethnic Mexican women to contest patriarchal authority. The women were under strict regulations when it came to dating, always requiring a chaperone. Martha’s husband, then boyfriend, was only allowed to visit her at home if the brothers or parents were in their presence. When they planned dates, such as a trip to the movies or an

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<sup>60</sup> Mary Resendez, interviewed by Katherine Hearty, video recording, 28 March 2001, Folder 84, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>61</sup> Sallie Castro interviewed by Nicole Griffith, video recording, 1 March 2001, Folder 22, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>62</sup> Linda Estrada, interviewed by Gloria Monita, video recording, 19 Oct. 2002, Folder 360, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>63</sup> Placida Barrera, *Narratives*, by Emily Burgess, Spring 2003. Interviewed by Virgilio Roel, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 236, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

outing to a picnic, Martha was required to take her brother, as was Vikki. After marriage Martha married in 1942, the parental supervision eased off.

Aurora and her sisters were finally allowed to date during the war, but the shortage of men made it impossible for a date to come through. The store owner of Baum, in Mercedes, told her young women often stopped by his store to gaze at mannequins of male figures, missing the boys from home.<sup>64</sup>

Elizabeth openly resisted her parents' strict authority and gendered duties. During her school years, her father paid for her attendance to a private Catholic school where they taught her to prepare for her role as a wife. Elizabeth's mother reinforced her husband's patriarchal authority by making sure her daughter learned how to cook and clean. Elizabeth was put in charge of cooking breakfast for everyone at home, and had to do the dishwashing. If she wished to go out with friends, she was required to finish all her schoolwork and chores beforehand. Even then, Elizabeth and her friends usually only met at their local church because her mother disapproved of the idea of having her daughter roaming the streets, a place not for appropriate for girls.<sup>65</sup>

Elizabeth grew to desire to follow in her sister's footsteps and become a nun. However, her plans quickly changed when her parents' denied her permission to visit her sister in San Antonio. The strict regulation prompted Elizabeth to realize she did not want to be under any restrictions, by her parents nor a religious institution. Her desire to date led her to rebel against

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<sup>64</sup> Aurora Castro, "Marching to the Music of Life", *Narratives*, interviewed and written by Anna Zukowski, Spring 2004, 25 Oct. 2003, Folder 339, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Garcia, "Haunted by war, Garcias rebuild life," *Narratives*, written and interviewed by Hannah McIntyre, Spring 2000; Transcript, 3, Folder 38, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

her parents; she dated a soldier name Willie. Elizabeth's father disapproved because of his conception of male soldiers as womanizers, such as the ones he knew in Mexico. Although Elizabeth was hesitant on marrying so soon, she finally agreed on the belief that she would get out of the house and not have to live under her parents restrictions. However, with her husband's draft to the war, she remained at home.<sup>66</sup>

The wartime opportunities also exposed the women to mingle with other racial and ethnic groups, which sometimes resulted in mixed race relationships. When Herminia's sister returned back from the military, she announced her engagement to an Anglo soldier. Herminia, herself, was not accepting of her sister's wish to marry a "gringo" because she felt that each should stick to their own.<sup>67</sup> Cross cultural marriages became common during the war period, especially for those who left home and gained exposure of a societies other than their own. For the people who remained at home during the war, like Herminia, it was difficult to accept the drastic changes. Through time, and through the advice of a trusted priest, she was able to slowly realize it was time for change. She began to understand the marriage as a means of equal opportunity. When Martha's brothers came home from the war, they returned with their brides, one was German and the other Japanese.<sup>68</sup> The cross cultural marriages of her brothers was truly at its intense and controversial form, as they chose to marry women from their country's wartime enemies.

As soldiers returned home, family and friends would anxiously await for their arrival at train stations. Aurora recalled "some of them were crippled, some of them were blind, and some

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Herminia Cadena, interviewed by Ismael Martinez, 2 Jan. 2004, Folder 334, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>68</sup> Martha Vidaurri, interviewed by Tammy Greis, interview index, page 4, reviewed by Joanne R. Sanchez, 13 Sept. 2003. Folder 161 VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

of them would have one arm.”<sup>69</sup> Although the war was over for the boys overseas, the women fought a whole new battle at home. Many of the men who returned home did not only come home physically injured, as Aurora described, but they also suffered psychological trauma due to their brutal experiences in battle. Davie described her once “very kind” brother, as different when he returned from war.

Some of the returning soldiers rarely shared their experiences, if not at all. After Gloria’s brother came back, “he would tell me the Japanese would try and commit suicide.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Herminia’s brother spoke of his experiences years after the war, but only twice, when he got drunk enough to open the attic of his mind. Although Sallie’s husband never shared stories with her, she recalled his nightmares consisting of harsh screams that woke her up at night. Once, Sallie was notified by a store owner her husband had visited, that after a car backfired, he dove under the car as an automatic reflex. Ascencion’s husband who lost his hand from the enemy grenade, attempted suicide by jumping out of the building where he was receiving treatment. Thanks to some people who noticed his behaviors, they pulled him away from the window.<sup>71</sup>

Elizabeth, who had married her husband Willie in part to break free from parental authority, remained under their supervision even after their marriage due to Willie’s health complications. Willie’s war experience took a turn for the worse when he fell ill from the stress. “The stress was so bad he couldn’t eat, he couldn’t walk, he used to scratch himself on the face

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<sup>69</sup> Aurora Orozco, interviewed by Desiree Mata, video recording, 17 Oct. 2003, Folder 399, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>70</sup> Gloria Alaniz, interviewed by Yvonne Lim, video recording, 18 Oct. 2003, Folder 313, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>71</sup> Ascencion Cortez, interview index, 4, Desiree Mata, indexed 1 Feb. 2004, interviewed by Desiree Mata, 25 Oct. 2003, Folder 346, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

and arms and he used to hear voices.”<sup>72</sup> Willie’s health deteriorated, which made Elizabeth assume he would not survive. After Willie’s treatment in San Antonio, he was sent to Waco, where he received shock treatment. As his health got better, they trained him as a tailor and Elizabeth was able to visit him. However, as per her mother’s belief in women not travelling along, she was chaperoned by her brother. Willie was treated in Waco for a year before moving into Elizabeth’s parents’ home, since her parents’ and doctors did not find it entirely safe for Elizabeth to be left alone with her husband.<sup>73</sup>

The lives of these ethnic Mexican women demonstrate the contributions of women that are often overlooked; writing letters to servicemen overseas, selling advertisements, collecting tin and scrap metal, buying war bonds, baby-sitting for military families, and holding ceremonies for fallen soldiers. Most importantly, these women represented true strength for their families. They balanced the emotional angst of fear and worry for their loved ones in battle, working, and volunteering, while learning to accommodate, negotiate, and resist patriarchal authority. Although the women faced gendered, racial, and economic struggles before and during the war the strength ultimately shined through the care for their loved ones who returned physically and psychologically distressed. The women’s battles continued long after the war.

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<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Garcia, “Haunted by war, Garcias rebuild life,” *Narratives*, written and interviewed by Hannah McIntyre, Spring 2000, Folder 38, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Garcia, interview index, page 11, interviewed by Hannah McIntyre, date unknown (2000), Folder 38, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The ethnic Mexican women's lived experiences that compose this thesis, remind us of their pre and wartime discrimination, economic struggles, educational limitations and achievements, relationships, employment, and family history. Leading up to World War II, most of the women already faced economic, gendered, social, and racial barriers; however, women were not discouraged to contribute to the war effort. Ethnic Mexican women from Texas participated in the military, wartime employment industries, and engaged in unconventional patriotic actions by writing letters to servicemen, collecting materials needed for war, entertained, among other wartime efforts. Through their wartime experiences, the women enacted agency to contest, accommodate, or negotiate the patriarchal rule they faced in their family and society. Moreover, the war allowed the women to experience social and economic opportunities that would had not been available before.

The women who joined the WACS broke multiple boundaries by simply enlisting. The military was a masculine institution, which continuously denied women to receive full military status. Moreover, a larger number of ethnic Mexican women began entering the service after application standards were lowered in the beginning of 1943. Not only were they pushing through gendered and racial barriers, they were stepping into a masculine space in the patriarchal homes.

The wartime defense industries, like the military, also allowed women to enter a male dominated workplace. The ethnic Mexican women who joined the defense manufacturing workforce learned how to weld, rivet, repair and became skilled mechanics in order to help build planes. Although they faced

resistance from other male employees, Ester, Josephine, Delfina, Wilhemina, and Maria Thomas became a smaller minority within the work space as being ethnic Mexican women.

The majority of the women encountered hardships early on in life. As witnessed in chapter four, many of the young women had to start contributing to the family's financial security at an early age. Many of the women entered the labor force working alongside their fathers, uncles, and siblings earning meager wages, but was crucial to the family's sustenance. Some of the women, like Vikki and Mary, had to drop out of school to enter the labor force full time. As women were expected to fulfill the maternal role, some of the young women were responsible for the siblings at a very young age. Gloria Alaniz quit school after she was put in charge of her siblings.

The women who entered the workforce part-time were also required to give most, if not all, their earnings to their parents. When the war started, many of the women in the wartime employment industries and military experienced a sense of financial autonomy. While Delfina and Wilhemina still sent money back home to their parents, they were still able to keep money for their own living and recreational expenses. Like many of the women who began earning their own money, they gained financial independence and an affirmation that they could survive on their own.

The war also loosened strict patriarchal control, who were at time required to be chaperoned by a sibling or parent at all times. Historian Vicki Ruiz, asserts that "chaperonage was a traditional instrument of social control."<sup>1</sup> World War II provided the women with opportunities break free from a centuries-old patriarchal practice in which they "rationalized, resisted, and evaded parental supervision."<sup>2</sup> Aurora Orozco and her sisters were finally allowed

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<sup>1</sup> Ruiz, page 51.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

to date during the war, but had no men left to take them out. While some of the women accommodated to parental authority, other's found ways to defy them. Elizabeth married a soldier, despite her father's disapproval, and married him to get out of her parent's control. Her marriage, ironically, brought the opposite outcome she had desired. Her husband's post-traumatic stress disorder required for her to stay at home for another six years after the war ended.

For the women who were able to obtain assignments and employment outside of their community, they were exposed to different cultures and racial/ethnic relations that would have otherwise not developed prior to the war. When Wilhemina and Delfina moved out to Seattle, they befriended African American couples.<sup>3</sup> Maria also made friends with Italian, Portuguese, Anglo, and African American women.<sup>4</sup>

The women who left home to obtain employment elsewhere, began dating outside of their racial/ethnic circles. They were not only breaking an implicit dating regulation, but they were also challenging the cultural norms. Maria Thomas was required to be chaperoned by two sister or her mother at all times, but during the war began dating an Anglo soldier, unbeknownst to her parents. When the couple announced their engagement, Maria's parents reacted with shock.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, when Herminia's sister returned home from the service, she introduced her Anglo fiancé, upsetting Herminia tremendously.<sup>6</sup> She did not approve of cross cultural marriages,

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<sup>3</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 10. Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Thomas, interviewed by Anna Zukowski, video recording, 13 Oct. 2003, Folder 420, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Herminia Cadena, interviewed by Ismael Martinez, 2 Jan. 2004, Folder 334, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

perhaps because she remained at home during the war and was not exposed to other practices and ideologies.

When employment opportunities were available, some of the women chose to stay home close to their families while others took the opportunity to travel to other parts of the country they had never seen. Wilhemina and Delfina, unfortunately, were not allowed to leave their home because of their father's need to watch over them and protect them from unsafe men. However, when the war intensified, the sisters bargained with the father, who eventually allowed them to leave to Seattle as long as they went together.<sup>7</sup> Ester, on the other hand, volunteered without her parents' permission, and told them it was involuntary.<sup>8</sup>

Josephine took charge of her patriotic duty after being "stuck" when her husband was denied enlistment, and instead negotiated the place of work. Her first job was just an hour away from Austin, until she got reassigned back home a few months later. When Josephine left for Big Springs, she got her husband a job at the same workplace so they could be together. Josephine's role as a wife and mother did not hinder her part in the war, instead she found ways to navigate her employment circumstances to fit her maternal and marital duties.<sup>9</sup>

Maria Salazar outright challenged her parent's authority by lying to her parents about visiting San Antonio, and enlisting in the WACS using her sister's identification.<sup>10</sup> While Maria contested, Concepcion negotiated with her mother, who allowed her to enlist if she was stationed

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<sup>7</sup> Wilhemina Vasquez interviewed by Brenda Sendejo, video recording, 28 July 2005, indexed by Kate Tarelton, 24 Oct. 2005, page 10. Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>8</sup> Theresa Casarez, "Theresa Herrera Casarez performs Mexican dances for World War II soldiers," *Narratives*, by Joanne R. Sanchez, Spring Semester 2001. Interviewed on 11 & 13 Oct. 2000, Folder 16, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>9</sup> Josephine Ledesma, interviewed by Monica Rivera, video recording, 17 Feb, 2001, Folder 58, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin..

<sup>10</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nikki Munoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

near home.<sup>11</sup> Maria and Rafaela eventually volunteered overseas, taking their own sense of independence a step further by risking their own lives to serve in a different part of the world.<sup>12</sup> These women risked their lives in ways that were unimaginable to the women who stayed on the home front. Maria still suffered from health complications associated with her overseas duty.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the women who were unable to finish school before and during the war returned to school and earned their diplomas. The majority of the women all pushed education as a key to success. Gregoria affirmed that “if you have an education, people will respect you. That has a lot to do with it. Go to school as much as you can and educate yourself.”<sup>14</sup> Vikki went back in her late 40s and early 50s to attend night classes and eventually earned her GED; Linda got her GED at age 55.<sup>15</sup> Placida also returned to finish her degree at Texas A & I University in Laredo, after withdrawing due to sick parents, and earned her degree in political science and Spanish at 52 years old.

Discrimination was encountered through their academic space, alienating some of the women from school clubs and dances. But the racial barriers did not hinder the determination of Ester, who after constant racial tensions between the Czech and Latinos, became the first Latina

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<sup>11</sup> Concepcion Escobedo, interview by Sandra Freyberg, video recording, 20 Sept. 2003, Folder 356, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nikki Munoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.; Rafaela Esquivel, interview by Joanne Sanchez, video recording, 12 April 2001, Folder 29, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Salazar, interviewed by Nikki Munoz, video recording, 28 Sept. 2002, Folder 411, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>14</sup> Gregoria Acosta Esquivel, “Wounded soldiers inspired girl to become nurse,” *Narratives*, by Lauren Slaughenhoupt, Spring 2003, interviewed by Laura Rivera, 1 Nov. 2002, Folder 254, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Guerrero, pre-interview form, page 3, Folder 266, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.; Linda Estrada, pre-interview form, page 3, Folder 360, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

to graduate from Richmond High School.<sup>16</sup> As soon as the war ended, she went straight into nursing school at Baptist Memorial Hospital in May 1946, where she was segregated. Still, she achieved her degree in nursing, becoming one of just four Latinas to do so.<sup>17</sup>

The opportunities granted by World War II not only provided the women with permission to maneuver between their domestic and social spaces, but it shaped their ideology and identity for the remainder of their lives. Their wartime actions, decisions, and experiences produced a strengthened consciousness and identity, which I argue, developed the growing resistance of women's contestation to their subscribed gendered roles challenged during the Chicana/o movement.

The World War II narrative of the United States has consistently focused on the all too often, Anglo male and to a lesser extent African American experiences. Thanks to the VOCES Oral History Project located in the Nettie Lee Benson Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, histories of Latinas and Latinos of the WWII generation, including the Korean and Vietnam wars, have been compiled and recorded. Their voices have provided an insight into the lives of Latinas and Latinos during a critical era in American history. Moreover, the oral histories of the ethnic Mexican women in the military, wage labor, and in their communities during World War II have provided me the opportunity to document their stories in this thesis.

Furthermore, an examination on the participation of ethnic Mexican women to WWII expands the Chicana/o and United States' World War II History. Looking at lives of ethnic Mexican women not only provides a unique observation into omitted narratives of history, but also disrupts the Black and White paradigm of United States historiography. Moreover, my

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<sup>16</sup> Ester Perez, interviewed by Gail Fisher and Erica Martinez, video recording, 23 May 2002, Folder 211, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

thesis on the ethnic Mexican women of Texas during World War II addresses a major gap in the history of women, Texas, and the nation. In Wilhemina's own words, "These have been wonderful stories to remember and tell" but "There are so many left untold..."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wilhemina Cooresman Vasquez, Letter to Ms. Lynn Walker, May 17, 2006, Folder 488, VOCES OHPA, Housed in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.

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