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# Local Mexican and Chicanoa Histories of Northern California

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## **Local Mexican and Chicano/a Histories of Northern California:**

### *The Sacramento Valley & the WWII Mexican American Generation*

Chicana and Chicano<sup>1</sup> communities in the United States have endured a historical legacy of exclusion. I define exclusion as the systematic process by which the dominant class ignores or distorts working-class, racial, and gender identity.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, controlling the historical consciousness of the society with the dominant group controlling and selecting the common stories that people of all races learn and that are essential to the creation of a collective historical consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Those who define history also define “truth”; by excluding the histories of particular ethnic groups in this country their histories and their truths are continuously being pushed to the fringes, if not omitted altogether from the collective historical narrative of the United States.<sup>4</sup> This article aims to highlight some of the significant historical experiences of Chicanos and Chicanas in Northern California; additionally it works to address the void in scholarship that deals specifically with the historical analysis of the Mexican American World War II generation of the Sacramento Valley.

Our collective memory of World War II shapes the cultural formation of our identity as Americans — who we are and what this country stands for. However, the manner in which we are remembering the past is so obviously distorted. History is our way of remembering what happened, directly through personal stories and indirectly through historical scholarship. With respect to this historical period, who’s history are

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<sup>1</sup> Chicana, Chicano, Mexican American & Latino/a are terms used in this study that refer to people of Mexican ancestry in the U.S.

<sup>2</sup> Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Sometimes There is No Other Side: Chicanos and the Myth of Equality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 57.

<sup>3</sup> *Historical consciousness*: The manner in which history is understood, examined and explained.

<sup>4</sup> Acuña, *Sometimes There is No Other Side*, 57.

we remembering?<sup>5</sup> More often than not it is the story of American men of European ancestry that gets passed on from one generation to the next, constructed as the collective history of the United States. The following historical account aims to provide overwhelming evidence that not only were Mexican Americans active participants in the World War II era, but more importantly their contributions and experiences provided a unique and significant influence to the historical narrative of communities locally, nationally and internationally of the World War II generation.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

People of Mexican ancestry living in the United States have consistently been distorted or omitted from the history of this country. Scholarship that is produced and continues to be produced is constructed through an inherently flawed methodology; the knowledge that is transmitted to generations of students of all races, is one that privileges white American men of European ancestry. Additionally, the scholarship pertaining to women of Mexican ancestry, if written at all, has proved to be just as flawed and just as distorted. The following section is an examination of scholarship that addresses these themes and aims to challenge the traditional legacy of historical exclusion.

In his book *A Different Mirror*, Ronald Takaki opens with a very poignant story that illustrates just how much the history of non-white, non-European peoples have been ignored from the mainstream American historical narrative, Takaki writes:

I had flown from San Francisco to Norfolk and was riding in a taxi to my hotel to attend a conference on multiculturalism... My driver and I chatted about the weather and tourists... The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties.

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 4.

“How long have you been in this country?” he asked. “All my life,” I replied, wincing. “I was born in the United States.” With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: “I was wondering because your English is excellent!” Then, as I had many times before, I explained: “My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880's. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years.” He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look “American” to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the consistent and systematic erasure of the experiences and contributions of different ethnic groups within the United States most Americans are not aware, and thus inconsiderate, of the historical presence of non-white people in America. Specifically, when discussing the history of Mexicans in the United States one can point to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as a watershed moment. In 1848, not only did Mexico lose approximately one half of its land to the United States, the Mexican people also experienced a loss of legal, economic and political power. At the treaty negotiations, the Mexican representatives pressed hard for two particular articles—Article IX granted full citizenship rights to the Mexicans residing in the ceded territory and Article X that recognized the Spanish and Mexican land grants as valid.<sup>7</sup> Neither of these obligations was enforced by the United States and this led to significant losses of land, money and political participation by Mexicans living in the Southwest. These key losses led directly to the exclusion of Mexicans in all facets of society and swiftly pushed this population of peoples to the margins of the American historical consciousness.

Chicano historian David Gutiérrez writes that the legacy of American expansion into Mexican lands has had a lasting and significant impact on the American historical consciousness not just because of the land and resources that it acquired but also

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 1.

<sup>7</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of the Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 311.

because Anglo Americans were allowed to produce the common stories that explained this historical phenomena.

The United States' penetration and conquest of Mexican territory was, of course, important, but... this represented only the first step in American expansion. Ultimately, the critical aspect of the annexation of the West proved to be the power that conquest bestowed on Americans to explain what had occurred there.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the results of the Mexican American War, Anglo American scholars were provided the luxury of excluding, distorting or exaggerating the stories that ultimately went on to help form the historical consciousness of this country.

Anglo American social scientists have compounded the problem of exclusion by incorrectly and inadequately documenting and examining race with respect to the history of the United States. In his book *Racial Fault Lines*, Tomás Almaguer specifically explains the manner in which race has served as the central organizing principle of group life in the southwest during the latter period of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Almaguer posits the idea that race and the racializing process was in fact the most significant factor in creating, extending and preserving the social positioning of Europeans, while simultaneously excluding and subjugating non-Europeans.<sup>10</sup> This is a significant point, one that distinguishes Almaguer's analysis from the dominant discourse of traditional historical scholars, in that he astutely examines the problem from a non-binary lens. Historically, in the United States, race has been discussed from a black/white perspective. However, when considering the ethnic composition of the Southwest, it

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<sup>8</sup> David Gutiérrez, "Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West" *Western Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 24, No.4 (Nov. 1993), 522.

<sup>9</sup> Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 205.

<sup>10</sup> Tomás Almaguer In *Racial Fault Lines* (205), discusses this as the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings.

would be inaccurate to apply this perspective to Mexicans. The sentiments of noted Chicano historian Juan Gómez-Quiñones also imply that this is flawed mode of analysis as he suggests that the common black-white paradigm is an inaccurate manner by which to examine both ethnic and class specifics in the United States. It ignores and limits the presence and progress of the Mexican population.<sup>11</sup>

Particular theories of race shape our understanding and definition of racial problems. The most common and powerful theory of race in this country is the black/white binary. This paradigm is defined as the idea that race in America consists, exclusively or primarily, of only two racial groups, the black and the white.<sup>12</sup> All too often scholars reproduce this paradigm when they write as though only the black and the white races matter for purposes of discussing race and social policy.<sup>13</sup> The common and misguided inclusion of “other people of color,” without careful attention to their voices, their experiences and their histories is a reinforcement of the black/white paradigm.<sup>14</sup> The paradigm mandates that racial identities and groups in the United States are best examined and understood through the black/white binary.<sup>15</sup> Because this paradigm is so commonly accepted, other racialized groups like Latinos/Latinas, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are routinely marginalized, disregarded or omitted altogether.<sup>16</sup>

Not only has there been an inadequate and insufficient examination of race in traditional historical scholarship; just as absent and just as distorted has been the

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<sup>11</sup> Juan Gómez-Quiñones, "Forward." *In Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics during WWII*, by Emilio Zamora. (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), ix.

<sup>12</sup> Juan F. Perea, *The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The "Normal Science" of American Racial Thought*. *California Law Review* Vol. 85, No. 5, *LatCrit: Latinas/os and the Law: A Joint Symposium by "California Law Review" and "La Raza Law Journal"* (Oct., 1997), 1213-1258.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

analysis of women. Through the examination of particular oral histories from Mexican American women of the World War II era, challenges to traditional narratives during this period in history surface. These underrepresented accounts of history create a space to examine non-traditional theories about women and gender roles. A close examination of women's individual stories illuminates how social change and shifts in race and gender consciousness occur, and it uncovers the nuances and intricacies of women's personal and distinct experiences.<sup>17</sup> A significant observation in the case study conducted by Brenda Sendejo reveals the philosophical shift that these women made with regards to their daughters. The wartime experiences provided an opportunity for women to raise their daughters with an alternative set of ethics, notably different from how they themselves had been raised.<sup>18</sup> Because of their expanded social role they seized the opportunity to shift the consciousness of their future generations. "...They afforded their daughters and granddaughters a new form of feminist consciousness as they demonstrated new heights of self-sufficiency and independence. This shift in consciousness shaped the lives of future family generations and their communities."<sup>19</sup> Contemporary generations of Chicanas point to the contributions of their mothers and grandmothers as fundamentally significant in the construction of their consciousness. Young women pointed to their mothers to an even greater extent, signifying that the fundamental shift into their own world as politically conscious Chicana women would not have taken place if not for the similarly meaningful experiences of their mothers.

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<sup>17</sup> Brenda Sendejo, *Mother's legacy* in Rivas-Rodriguez, Maggie and Emilio Zamora, ed., *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) 158.

<sup>18</sup> Sendejo, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Sendejo, 156.

The understanding of this collective historical shift strengthens their bond and illustrates just how much Mexican women have created a legacy as agents of history and culture.<sup>20</sup>

### **WOMEN ON THE HOME FRONT**

The experience of World War II deeply transformed the lives of Mexican American women in the Sacramento Valley. Employment opportunities in the defense sector that were once closed to women suddenly became open and employers in the region were actively recruiting female workers. Although working conditions in these jobs left much to be desired it still gave women the opportunity to shift the way men, and society as whole, perceived them. Mexican American women also established themselves in the very important cannery industry of the Sacramento Valley and were able to translate this opportunity into positive social mobility. However, not all of the experiences on the home front dealt with employment. Mexican American women of this generation also established themselves as prominent community organizers, philanthropist and pioneers of the Mexican American community in Sacramento. They were able to mobilize community members and successfully advocate for the Mexican American community on many different levels.

Women played a central role in both the war effort and the post war economy of Sacramento. During the World War II era women were called upon to fill the massive labor shortages throughout the United States; in Sacramento it was no different. All that was required was cultural permission—and the propaganda factories that were swiftly and collectively convincing women to take jobs in the defense industry provided this push.<sup>21</sup> Employment officials at the Sacramento Air Depot were actively seeking women

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<sup>20</sup> Sendejo, 177.

<sup>21</sup> Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited* (Massachusetts: First Meridian Printing, 1988) 200.



to fill their mechanical needs in 1942. They were offering women equal pay, starting at \$2,200 a year with full entry status as journeywomen if they were hired.<sup>22</sup> In a report from the *Sacramento Bee*, Depot officials stated:

Women as well as men, without previous mechanical training, are eligible to take new mechanic-learner aptitude tests which qualify them for a training course with pay of \$75 per month at Sacramento Junior College or one of more than thirty other institutions over the state cooperating in a new series of in service training courses. Anyone between the ages of 17 and 45 may apply to take the test. Interested persons are directed to apply at local post offices.<sup>23</sup>

During the war women were being offered the ability to work in jobs that had been traditionally only open to men. Moreover, they were now being offered wages that were higher than they used to receiving and that were on par to that of men. This newfound employment and economic opportunity created many changes for women in the work place.

Issues of working conditions were of significant concern to the women who were now working outside their traditional roles. The issues surrounding the working conditions of women were not just talked about on shop floors or between workers. The *Sacramento Union* conducted a symposium to determine the local feelings concerning California's industrial welfare commission's plan to allow women workers to fill the swing shift—11 p.m. to 6 a.m. in the aircraft depots.<sup>24</sup> The issue of women working the swing shift was a significant point of discussion in the community and within the industrial labor sector.

The axis is not fighting this war on an eight-hour day basis, husbands are going into the fighting forces, so why can't the women do their bit by working in an

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<sup>22</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 11 February 1942.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Sacramento Union*, 22 August 1942.

airplane plant if it is necessary? Production must go on 24 hours no matter who is behind the machinery.<sup>25</sup>

With this call for full wartime labor mobilization women were also able to bring to light certain economic injustices that they faced in the factories and at the workplace. As a collective, some of the women specifically highlighted what they wanted. They called attention to the fact that they were fighting right behind the front lines—and with equality as a central guiding ethic, women should be afforded the same financial compensation as men.<sup>26</sup> However, not all women worked in the defense sector during the war and in fact a common employer for Mexican women during and after the war was the cannery industry.

Petra Garcia Unzueta was born and raised in Los Herreras, in the Mexican state of Durango. She came to Stockton in the mid 1940's to work while her husband served as a bracero. They eventually settled in Sacramento in 1948. She began working at one of the local canneries and eventually ended up working for twenty-five years in the cannery industry. She worked for the Libby's, Del Monte and Bercut-Richards canneries, mainly canning asparagus, peaches and tomatoes.<sup>27</sup> Unzueta said she had a very good experience working at the canneries and she made many friends there. She mostly worked with Mexicans, both men and women, although there were also a significant number of Chinese workers as well as workers of other races. The shift-leaders where she worked were all women, Mexican, Italian, American and Portuguese. However, in the warehouse, where only men worked, all the managers were men.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Petra Garcia Unzueta interview, April 12, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Unzueta's experience is somewhat common of Mexican women coming to Sacramento during the World War II era, in that they had to work, and the work that was available to them was seasonal produce work in the various canneries in the Valley. In the canneries they were subjected to the lower wage jobs and even then they were commonly underpaid. An interesting part of her experience is that she mentions the friends that she made at the cannery with much reverence. An important reason why these friendships were meaningful was because they were formed, in part, by a collective effort to resist against the oppressive nature of the working conditions that the women dealt with. These informal workplace bonds grew out of a need for mutual support; but also to help the workers deal with the lack of access to higher wage jobs and to counter the overt discrimination that was realized by the women working in a two-tiered wage system.

The story of Guadalupe C. Aguilar illustrates a different type of social change. Aguilar was born in 1907 in San Antonio, Texas but moved to Sacramento in 1942. She moved to Sacramento because a significant number of her family members had relocated to northern California. During the war Aguilar and her family had bought property in Sacramento and paid approximately \$27,000 for it. The area was in the midst of being redeveloped after the war and so some developers wanted to purchase it from her. The only problem was that they did not want to give her fair market value for the property and instead offered her \$24,000. Aguilar responded to the offer in kind:

Listen, the time isn't any more where you people would come and fool the Mexicans... and beat them out of their land. I said, we have learned how to speak, read, and write English since then. So you can't tell me what price to take for my land. I want what I'm asking you and that's what I want. So if you can't give it to

me, don't lose my time and you don't lose yours.<sup>29</sup>

The buyers eventually agreed to pay market value and the property sold for \$30,000.<sup>30</sup> Aguilar represented a conscious shift in the way that women were now starting to assert their rights, demand respect and that they be treated in a forthright manner.

Not only did Mexican American women play a significant role in the logistical aspect of the war they were also instrumental in organizing the community behind the war efforts. This organizing took many forms and also had different goals. In addition to uniting community support for the war, these women saw an opportunity to publicly advocate for the social rights of all Mexican Americans. One such woman was Enriqueta Andazola, she was a longtime Sacramento resident and activist for Mexican American rights since the 1920's.<sup>31</sup> A native of Pinos Altos, Chihuahua, Mexico, she came to Sacramento in 1917. Andazola initially found employment with the Sacramento Wool Company but spent most of her years working in the Del Monte Cannery, while her husband, Ignacio Ramirez, worked for Southern Pacific Railroad.<sup>32</sup> "In addition to raising a family and working for 25 years at a local cannery, she formed a club for Mexican American women, Las Amigas del Hogar, and in 1939 she founded Union Femenie [sic]."<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Andazola sent four sons and a son-in-law to World War II, and helped lead a group called the Mexican War Mothers. It marked one of the first times locally that Mexican Americans asserted themselves publically.<sup>34</sup> Andazola had a significant impact on the Mexican American community in Sacramento and when she

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<sup>29</sup> Guadalupe C. Aguilar, Interview conducted by Rosana Madrid, (Sacramento, CA, January 16 & 25, 1984) 47.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Avella, Steven M. *Capitol City: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of Sacramento, 1850-2000*. (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2008) 219.

<sup>33</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

passed away in 1980 was affectionately referred to in her eulogy as “la pionera de nuestra colonia Mexicana.”<sup>35</sup>

Andazola took it upon herself to be extremely active in the community and aimed at organizing groups and events that promoted cultural pride within her community.

She organized social clubs for women that sponsored dances and other social events. She played a role in organizing a branch of the Alianza Hispano-Americana in 1936 and took particular pride in sponsoring patriotic and cultural programs for the Sacramento community.<sup>36</sup>

Andazola was also instrumental in helping to promote and organize Sacramento’s Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day Celebrations.<sup>37</sup> One particular center that had a significant impact on the Mexican American community in Sacramento was *El Centro Mexicano de Sacramento*. After the establishment of the center Andazola was extremely active in the organization and “worked hard to make the new center a place of cultural pride for the city’s Latinos/as.”<sup>38</sup> But perhaps her most significant contribution to the Mexican American community of Sacramento was that of her World War II War Memorial.

Four of Andazola’s sons and one son-in-law had served in the military during WWII, because of this; she and her close friend Antima Perez formed a group called the Mexican War Mothers. During the war this group actively worked at boosting the morale of Latino soldiers in the Sacramento area, and Andazola along with the other

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<sup>35</sup> Avella, *Capitol City*, 219.

<sup>36</sup> Avella, *Capitol City*, 220.

<sup>37</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Avella, *Capitol City*, 221.

Mexican War Mothers hosted dances, made meals, sent cards, and visited sick soldiers.<sup>39</sup> The Mexican War Mothers felt it was particularly important to note the sacrifice that the people from their community had made. “To honor the memory and service of Mexican Veterans, the war mothers raised money for a Mexican-American War Memorial, with a statue of a Mexican soldier...”<sup>40</sup> In 1951, this memorial was placed in front of El Centro Mexicano de Sacramento; when El Centro closed in 1975, the memorial was moved to Capitol Park. In Capitol Park, which lies just across the street from the state Capitol in downtown Sacramento, stands one of Enriqueta Andazola’s realized dreams: A statue honoring all veterans of WWII, but in particular the Mexican American men who sacrificed their lives so valiantly during the Second World War. A photograph of one of Andazola’s sons inspired the likeness for the statue.<sup>41</sup>

#### **GREASER LAWS IN SACRAMENTO**

As the state capital, Sacramento turned out to be the focal point for significant discussions surrounding the importation of farm labor from Mexico. With California and in particular the Sacramento Valley, charged with producing, processing and shipping more food than ever, while utilizing less than expected labor, this proved to be a tall order. State senators heard testimony from local growers regarding the possibility of crop shortages and heavy losses due to the labor shortages. Although the state senate committee gave its endorsement to a guest worker program, many ideas were explored including; an encouragement by state Senator Kenny of Los Angeles asking that approximately 150,000 of the states old age pensioners volunteer as farm workers.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 19 December 2007.

<sup>42</sup> *San Jose Mercury Herald*, 23 April 1942.

With the city of Sacramento extremely concerned over the issue of farm labor shortages and predictions of millions of dollars of losses to local growers, the local businessmen and law enforcement officials jumped to action to address this situation. In a report by *The Sacramento Bee* in June of 1942 the sentiment of urgency and a need to address the problem of labor shortage resonated clearly. Possible solutions of citizen volunteer programs as well as recruiting young boys through YMCA camps were discussed. However in the same article under the sub section *West End Problem* the article states: “Among the matters scheduled for discussion is that of keeping the west end of the city free of drunkards and loafers who should be working on the farms.”<sup>43</sup> The west end of town was where most of the city’s minority population resided, and by 1950 the west end comprised eighty-seven percent of the city’s Mexican population.<sup>44</sup>

A local political group called the Family Welfare and Relief Committee of the Sacramento Community Welfare Council met in June of 1942 to discuss the farm labor shortage in Sacramento. The discussions surrounded on ways to entrap minorities, mostly Mexican and “recruit them as farm laborers” with the full assistance of the local law enforcement. The local community was working alongside the local law enforcement to enforce *greaser laws*.<sup>45</sup> These were usually some sort of vagrancy or loitering ordinances that were aimed at targeting Mexican men for petty misdemeanors. The strategy consisted of taking the men into the custody of local law enforcement that then could be used as a cheap and controllable labor force in the agricultural sector. In a *Sacramento Bee* report highlighting the committee’s understanding and praise for the

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<sup>43</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 4 June 1942.

<sup>44</sup> Jesus Hernandez, *Connecting Segregation to Contemporary Housing Credit Practices and Foreclosures: A Case Study of Sacramento*, Written testimony submitted to the National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (Los Angeles Hearing, September 9, 2008), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Vagrancy laws that were clearly aimed at prohibiting the presence of Mexicans within the community.

manner in which farm laborers were being sought to fill the labor shortage, the following excerpt was taken:

The committee, under the chairmanship of Roy C. Donnally, manager of the United States Employment Service office in Sacramento, agreed wonderful strides so far have been made by various branches of the law enforcement agencies in making men available for farm labor. Donnally said the committee generally felt the perseverance of the local agencies in cleaning up the west end of the city will go a long way in helping the labor shortage. He said Chief of Police Alec K. McAllister, Sheriff Don Cox and the state board of equalization were complimented on the work they have done in this regard.<sup>46</sup>

Again, the west end of the city is where a majority of the Mexican population lived. This was a clear example of harassment and entrapment by local businessmen and local law enforcement officials to secure a cheap and controllable labor force. This scheme proved to be a conscious and systematic effort of controlling Mexicans for the purpose of social and economic manipulation.

#### **EXPERIENCE IN THE ARMED FORCES**

Mexican Americans are not a monolithic people and the following historical accounts provided a clear example of the wide spectrum of emotions and experiences that Mexican Americans had during this significant era in history. From the ultra patriotic soldiers wanting to prove that they were just as American as any other man, to the humble yet honorable Mexican Americans ready to serve when their name was called. These stories are juxtaposed with Mexican Americans who saw the manner in which their communities were being discriminated against and how Mexican American veterans were returning to a county that treated them as second-class citizens. These histories tell the story of a group of people that were just as brave as any soldier in

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<sup>46</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, 11 June 1942.



wanting end the discrimination and choose to consciously reject military service. These collective experiences are distinctive but work to illustrate the unique and complex contributions and experiences that Mexican Americans had in the Armed forces.

There were a number of reasons why Mexican Americans were highly involved with the war effort. First, many of the Mexican communities tended to have large populations of draft-age Mexican American males. Most of these young men did not have jobs that were considered to be essential to the war effort, thus making them eligible for the draft. When World War II started there were approximately 2.7 million Mexicans living in the United States, close to one-third of those were draft age males, estimates show that anywhere from 375,00 to 500,00 Mexican Americans served in the armed forces.<sup>47</sup> For those men who were living in the United States without proper residency documents, they were “encouraged” to enlist by legislation that promised citizenship in exchange for military service.<sup>48</sup> Second, because Mexican Americans generally did not have the economic mobility that most Anglos had, the military provided the chance for this upward movement. World War II also presented Mexican Americans with a perceived opportunity to gain social and cultural acceptance from the country. It was a way for Mexican Americans to help promote the ideals and promise that the United States of America had represented to so many generations of people. Raul Morín, a veteran of WWII, was one of the first authors to document the experiences and contributions of Mexican American soldiers in World War II and the Korean War in his book *Among The Valiant*. Morín writes:

Most of us were more than glad to be given the opportunity to serve in the war.

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<sup>47</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 323.  
<sup>48</sup> Matt S. Meier & Feliciano Ribera, *Mexican Americans/American Mexicans: From Conquistadors to Chicanos*. (New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 160.

We knew there was something great about this country that was worth fighting for. We felt that this was an opportunity to show the rest of the nation that we too were also ready, willing, and able to fight for our nation. It did not matter whether we were looked upon as Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, or belonging to a minority group; the war soon made us all genuine Americans, eligible and available immediately to fight and defend our country, the United States of America.<sup>49</sup>

This type of sentiment convinced a substantial portion of the Mexican American population to participate in the war.

While serving in World War II Mexican Americans distinguished themselves as a group that was willing and capable of taking on any mission or objective. Mexican Americans also proved that they could do this with an extremely high level of resolve and success. According to a few Mexican American veterans a predominant sentiment was that: "Officers found it easy to exploit the sense of machismo, or super manliness, of Latin American males. Many Mexican American G.I.s volunteered for hazardous duties, exhibiting an exaggerated patriotism produced by their determination to prove that they were as "American" as anyone."<sup>50</sup> This determination was noticed and confirmed as twelve Mexican Americans went on to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The Sacramento chapter of the American GI Forum was named after Alejandro Renteria Ruiz who lived at the Veterans Home of Yountville, California about one hour west of Sacramento until he passed on November 20, 2009. Ruiz was a twenty-one year old army private fighting in Okinawa when he singled-handedly killed twelve enemy soldiers and saved the lives of forty men in his platoon.<sup>51</sup> At the time of Ruiz's death he

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<sup>49</sup> Raul Morin, *Among the Valiant* (Alhambra: Borden Publishing Co., 1966), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in California: A History of Mexican Americans in California*, (San Francisco: Boyd & Fraser Publishing Company, 1984), 71.

<sup>51</sup> "Alejandro Ruiz United States Congressional Medal of Honor," *Hispanic Times*, July 1997, 3.

was the last living Mexican American World War II Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

Not everyone was eager to prove their American patriotism, not everyone was ready to serve in the armed forces and not all Mexican Americans felt the overwhelming need to put their life on the line to defend the United States. Ruben Reyes was a Chicano from Arizona who moved to California at the age of 18 to find work at the Libby cannery in Sacramento in 1949. Affected by the intense racism that he experienced as a youth, Reyes had fostered some very profound ideas about what it meant to be an American in the 1940's. Reyes had developed an embittered view of life in America for a Chicano and openly questioned what it meant to serve in the United States military as a Chicano.

I definitely told them, from day one, that there was no way in the world that I was ever going to fight for this country... I grew up in a place where they wouldn't serve me food, they wouldn't allow me in any restaurants, we couldn't swim in your swimming pools, you know, what are you talking about? Freedom in America? Baloney. You know, that's, America doesn't belong to me and I've never been part of the melting pot. And basically, I just don't recognize myself as a, as someone that wants to defend a country that is as racist as this country is. And I refused to fight.<sup>52</sup>

Reyes was in the service for a total of eighteen months, however, he continued to refuse to fight and eventually received an Undesirable Discharge.<sup>53</sup> Reyes continued his criticism of America and the racism that he experienced:

I didn't believe this was a free country or that there was equal opportunity. I just, from the core, to this very day, I believe this is about one of the most racist countries in the world. I believe that and I, you know, live with that... What you say is a subtle, I call sophisticated racism, you know. It's just a different way of

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<sup>52</sup> Ruben Reyes, oral history conducted by Rosana Madrid, Sacramento, CA, December 5, 1983. p. 10

<sup>53</sup> Discharge under other than honorable conditions of a person from military service by administrative action.

doing it. The anger and the racism and the hatred for people that are the non-Whites in this country, is just as strong as it was when I grew up.<sup>54</sup>

Although Reyes was drafted to fight in the Korean War his experience of seeing Mexican Americans veterans return from World War II and continue to be disrespected had a significant impact on him. Reyes himself had experienced challenges as well as blatant acts of discrimination that helped to form his consciousness during this era. He made a conscious choice to, not object, but rather to reject the United States military. Hundreds of thousands of Mexican and Mexican American men worked and fought for the United States during the Second World War. They had many a myriad of experiences and contributions that provide an often-underrepresented narrative to United States history during this period.

This study has proved that the Mexican American World War II generation of the United States, and in particular of the Sacramento Valley, were not an ahistorical people. Furthermore, this research aligns itself with other work by Chicana and Chicano scholars in an effort to seize the opportunity to tell our own story. So often the manner in which people of Mexican ancestry are depicted in United States history is distorted. The hope is that by providing this underrepresented account of history, students and scholars of all races will be able to construct a more accurate historical consciousness.

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<sup>54</sup> Reyes, pp. 10-11

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