

Commentary

Texas should be learning about Mexican-American culture

By Cynthia E. Orozco - Reprinted from *Opinion*, Special to the American-Statesman, Austin, Texas

Editor's Note: *My editorial speaks to my personal experience in pursuing and implementing Mexican American Studies at UT-Austin in the early 70s mirroring what is currently happening in our state—50 years, later.*

The year is 1968 and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission is holding a hearing in San Antonio to hear Mexican-Americans from across the nation, but especially San Antonio, plead their case. They are there to hear about political, economic, cultural and educational problems.

Mexican-Americans began to state their case in 1845, when the United States forcefully incorporated them into the nation. A 1911 Laredo congress was held to condemn lynching of Mexican-descent people, racially segregated schools, and the loss of the Spanish language. That same year, a Mexican-American — J.T. Canales, the only Mexican-American in the Legislature — was called the “greaser from Brownsville” while on the floor during the session. World War I veterans were denied the right to eat at restaurants throughout Texas. The Order Sons of America responded — and the League of United Latin American Citizens was formed in 1929. María L. Hernández and her husband, Pedro, also formed a civil rights/mutual aid society called the Order Knights of America in San Antonio. Back then, inferior separate “Mexican” schools were the order of the day.

How SBOE could advance plan for Mexican-American studies.

World War II brought brief acceptance of the Spanish language and the teaching of Hispanic history in some schools through the textbooks prepared by Edmundo Mireles and folklorist Jovita González of Corpus Christi. But Mexican-American veterans returning from World War II still could not get a cup of coffee in many restaurants. A Bastrop school case began the end to legal segregated schools for Latinos in 1948.

About 50 years after their association was formed in San Antonio, activists Pedro and María Hernández — now into their 70s — testified before the U.S. Commission in 1968. They submitted their document requesting “that adequate civic instruction begin in the elementary school and continue through all the higher grades for the purpose of erasing racial hatred and eliminating deformed historical narratives.”

Also in 1968, Mexican-American high school students called for curriculum about themselves in places like San Antonio,

Kingsville, and Edcouch-Elsa ISD in the Valley. Decades long civil rights activist Adela Sloss-Vento wrote the McAllen Monitor to congratulate student protestors. She wrote, “Students protested

against discrimination for speaking Spanish on the campus, as well as for their demands, to have a course taught in said schools relating to the contributions of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the state and region, including factual account of the history of the Southwest and culture and history of Mexico.” She added, “There is no harm in this kind of knowledge. This kind of knowledge will bring



unity and understanding.”

Around 1968, Chicano studies began to take root in Texas colleges. Too little progress had been made. The Texas State Historical Association, a private association and history advocate, had included only three Mexican-descent women as relevant to the history of Texas in its 1976 edition of the Handbook of Texas encyclopedia. Since then, the book has added scores of Latinos relevant to Texas. There is even a Tejano Handbook of Texas.

In 2016, several writers authored a Mexican-American studies textbook — but they were not scholars and included inaccuracies and racist references to Mexicans as “lazy.” Imagine 140 errors in one textbook. In 2018, another textbook was rejected.

Mexican-American Studies Texas and the Texas chapter of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies have played a major role in advancing the call for classes and curriculum. Chicano teachers and scholars have prepared accurate standards for high school classroom teaching. Curriculum is available, and time for a scholar to write a better textbook is needed. The will from the Texas State Board of Education, an elected board, to approve a high school class in Mexican-American studies is needed.

Fifty years have passed since the 1968 U.S. civil rights hearing. Texas now has significant information about its Mexican-descent people — but the knowledge needs to seep down to the masses. It is high noon — time that this information be shared with schoolchildren. The Texas State Board of Education must approve Mexican-American studies for Texas schools. Latinos are already 52 percent of the state’s student population. We cannot wait another 50 years.

BIO: Orozco is a professor of history and humanities at Eastern New Mexico University and a Texas State Historical Association fellow. *Reprinted with permission of the author.*