

San Antonio Celebrates

84th Anniversary of Pecan Shellers Strike

On Sunday afternoon, January 30, 2022 Cassiano Park, in San Antonio's westside, served as the backdrop for a celebration of the 84th anniversary of the 1938 Pecan Sheller's Strike led by the young American hero, Emma Tenayuca. At the gathering initiated by District 5 Councilperson, Terry Castillo, featured speakers—Texas Poet Laureate Carmen Tafolla and Sharyll Teneyuca—spoke about the challenges that confronted the pecan shellers at the time. Mostly, Mexican and Mexican American, they were not allowed to serve on juries or to vote without restrictions like the poll tax. The No Mexicans Allowed mentality was in effect and extended to lunch counters, restaurants, swimming pools and theaters. The Great Depression disproportionately impacted poor & working class families who found putting food on the table required extraordinary efforts. Living conditions for pecan shellers who often lived in company shacks meant living without running water or sanitation. Public Health statistics of the time indicated that San Antonio had the highest rates of tuberculosis deaths in the country as well as high infant mortality rates—something that the dust from cracked pecans that hung in the air contributed to.

When employers decided to cut wages, pecan shellers fought back walking off their jobs declaring a strike that was to last three months and inspire 12,000 workers (mostly women) to march for higher wages and better working conditions. The pecan shellers who were paid the paltry sum of less than three dollars a week for their manual labor in poor work facilities persisted in challenging management and San Antonio city officials while enduring criticism from mainstream Mexican American organizations. Despite the fact that pecans were the largest industry in the city and that Texas produced 50% of the nation's pecans, the workers making that possible did not benefit from the profits made.

The Pecan Shellers unanimously chose Emma Tenayuca as their strike leader. She was 21 years old at that time. She had



Carmen Tafolla & Sheryll Tenayuca speak at Cassiano Park on the occasion of the 84th Anniversary of the Pecan Shellers Strike. Photo by Robin Jerstad, *Express News*

previously participated in a separate strike on Buena Vista St. waged by cigar workers—an activity for which she was arrested—in 1933 when she was only 16. She wasn't a pecan sheller—she was a concerned citizen known for speaking out with a gift for organizing movements, Tafolla said. The Pecan Shellers strike began on January 31, 1938 and ultimately led to many arrests during the duration of the strike with up to 700 arrests being made that drew national and international attention. At Governor James Allred's urging, the Texas Industrial Commission investi-

gated possible violations of civil rights in San Antonio and found the police interference with the right of peaceful assembly to be unjustified. According to the Texas Handbook of the Texas State Historical Association, the strike yielded better pay, with further improvements that led to Congress establishing a minimum wage later that year. In March 1938 both sides agreed to arbitration. An initial settlement of seven and eight cents was increased when Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established a minimum wage of twenty-five cents an hour. Concerned that the minimum-wage law would encourage remechanization of the industry in Texas and thereby displace thousands of shellers, the Congress of Industrial Organizations joined with the employers' association in seeking an exemption of pecan workers from provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act. The Department of Labor, however, denied the exemption, and over the next three years cracking machines replaced more than 10,000

shellers in San Antonio shops. To this day, the Pecan Shellers Strike continues to have an impact on U.S. labor history and must always be remembered. As Sharyll Teneyuca noted her Aunt Emma was almost forgotten in the annuals of history but her role in San Antonio and in labor history, once forgotten and erased, is now beginning to be realized.

María del Refugio Ozuna, age 13, and Mrs. San Juan Gonzáles, age 7, working at Southern Pecan Shelling Co., Jan. 17, 1938. | Photo courtesy of UTSA—one of the photos on display at the Cassiano Park celebration.

