

SAVE THE STORY:

THE EMMA TENAYUCA PROJECT

By Sharyll Soto Teneyuca

EDITOR'S NOTE: *On the occasion of the 84th anniversary of the Pecan Shellers Strike, we are reprinting this excerpt from the Nov 2001 La Voz written by Sharyll Teneyuca in tribute to her aunt, Emma Tenayuca, who led the pecan shellers strike on January 31, 1938.*

I was probably about 9 or 10 years old when I was first aware that there was something about our last name and my Aunt Emma that wasn't openly discussed in our family. Without understanding, I only had an impression that something had happened a long time ago that was now hush-hush. It was as if the family was protecting her.

The first door to open for me into this mystery happened when I was about fifteen. On what was probably the 30-year anniversary of the Municipal Auditorium riot of 1939, I picked up the newspaper to find a pictorial commemoration of the event, with pictures and vivid descriptions. I read with awe that "Emma Tenayuca was the charismatic leader of a movement that shook the city's labor force, "a "fiery orator" who married Homer Brooks, a Communist. She had been involved in organizing and fighting for the rights of the city's poor against some of the city's most profitable industries. I read of the mass destruction done to the municipal auditorium by the angry mob who stormed it in protest of the Communist party meeting that was to be held there that night and at which she was to speak. I was both proud and impressed to finally learn the family secret about Aunt Emma.

My aunt's response to this article, of which I'm sure she had no warning, was not positive. She had only been back in San Antonio about a year or two and was teaching public school on the South side. She feared for her job. I later learned that, after her years of organizing, a steady, decent job had been unavailable to her for years. On this occasion, though, she need not have worried. She continued to teach in the Harlandale district until her retirement in 1982.

It was that newspaper article, finally ending the years of our family's secrecy, that planted in me the seeds of longing for the rest of the story. I believe I have been, in various stages, working on retrieving my aunt's story since that first memorable awakening about her role in history.

Several years ago, I met Dr. Carmen Tafolla at a dinner where I accepted an award for my aunt. I learned that Carmen had known my aunt during the late 70s and early 80s. I didn't know she was also an acclaimed poet and author. We eventually discussed the possibility of working together on my aunt's biography. When I asked for her assistance, she immediately said yes. We have become friends as well as partners in the project.

I have had many more windows and doors to the past open for me since. One of my favorites was the way I was greeted as a new lawyer in San Antonio in the early 80's, when I first began walking the halls

of the courthouse. When strangers of my aunt's generation heard my last name, they would immediately ask if I was related to her. I remember how their eyes would shine as they spoke of her. They spoke of her courage and her talent. They told me she was someone who really cared about the people. I read in their faces more than they could actually say. I saw in them how deeply she had been revered. They spoke of her as if she had no equal.

I had another glimpse into the power of her persona at a Miss Fiesta pageant during the 80's. Part of the competition was to portray a significant woman in history. One of the contestants, Laura Hernández, chose Aunt Emma for her dramatic presentation. She had come to me for some direction in her research and later invited us to the pageant. During intermission, I ran into my friend and former employer, Rick Grennan, who was one of the pageant sponsors. When I introduced him to my aunt and he realized that one of the "historic women" who had been portrayed on



"I was arrested a number of times. I never thought in terms of fear. I thought in terms of justice."

stage was actually present, he was elated. He insisted that she come on stage to say a few words. My aunt was not the least bit anxious or hesitant at the invitation. I, however, was secretly terrified that she might never leave the stage, once she warmed up to whatever would be her topic. I must have admonished her a dozen times, "No more than five minutes, alright? Remember, keep it short."

She was slightly annoyed at my anxiety but informed me calmly, "It's alright. I know what I'm going to say." Not only was I worried for nothing, I was about to witness a jewel of a moment. As she stood on that darkened stage, with all the contestants in elegant evening gowns lined up behind her, the air was full of tension and anticipation. It took her but a moment to ignite that expectant audience. Though she, in her way, merely shared a few insights on a recent political scandal and suggested that the young pageant contestants seriously consider a career in politics and public service, the audience seemed to want to keep her for their own. They gave her a standing ovation and were still cheering her and calling her name as we walked to the parking lot.

Besides my relief that night after it was all over, I could only think to myself, "Even in her 70s, she has not lost her touch." She still had the ability to reach to the depths of people's hearts through the gift of her voice. I was able to begin to imagine her impact so many years ago when people starving and children dying moved her to a life-altering course of action. The suffering and injustice she saw would not let her be silent. I could begin to understand how she led the largest strike in the city's history.

BIO: Sharyll S. Teneyuca, niece of Emma Tenayuca, is an attorney in San Antonio with her own private practice. She is also co-author with Carmen Tafolla of the children's book, That's Not Fair! / ¡No Es Justo!: Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice/La lucha de Emma Tenayuca por la justicia. Photo: Emma Tenayuca in Bexar County Jail, June 29, 1937. Courtesy, UTSA Special Collections.