

Emma Tenayuca:

La Voz

That

Shook

San

Antonio

by Dee Villarubia



MEXICAN. The San Antonio Tenayuca was born into was a place of limited opportunities for Mexicanos. The context was racial segregation and economic subordination of Mexicanos. Restaurants, theaters, water fountains, schools, jobs, and all public places were segregated. Discrimination led to Mexicanos (half of the city's population) being impoverished. Tenayuca recalled, "...There were no bus drivers that were Mexicanos when I was growing up. The only Mexican workers employed by the City Public Service and the Water Board were laborers, ditch diggers. I remember they used to take the leaves from the pecan tress and they would put them on their heads in order to go out and dig ditches. I came into contact with many, many families who had grievances, who had not been paid. I was perhaps eight or nine years old at the time." [http://www.texancultures.com/library/tenayucaInterview.htm]

During The Great Depression, a Mexican Repatriation Program sponsored by the United States government deported more than 500,000 individuals, about 60 percent actually being U.S. citizens. Anti-Mexican-American prejudice created a climate where the Texas Rangers brutalized the Mexican-American population. Historians estimate that thousands of Mexicans/Mexican Americans were killed by the Texas Rangers. Between 1848 and 1928 at least 597 Mexicans were lynched. Anti-Mexican mob violence resulted in Mexicans becoming politically disenfranchised. Immigration raids were a fact of life for Mexican Americans in the 30s. After WWII, the Justice Department launched Operation Wetback. [See Wikipedia, History of Mexican Americans/Anti-Mexican Sentiment]



Emma Tenayuca was Mexican-American, Indian, Mujer, Catholic, poor, a labor organizer and a Communist. Currents of prejudice lashed at Emma as a child, teen and adult. Yet, she shook San Antonio as the charismatic leader of a labor movement. No justicia seemed possible for any of the different aspects of her Self. Listen to Emma's own words: "I think it was the combination of being a Texan, being a Mexican, and being more Indian than Spanish that propelled me to take action." Two major historical events, the Great Depression and The Mexican Repatriation, shaped Tenayuca's life and political ideology.

INDIAN. In an 80's interview by the **Institute of Texan Cultures**, Emma reflected on the prejudice experienced because of her father's being Indio. "... certain members of my mother's family never accepted my father. Para ellos él era indio, verdad, y pues no lo aceptarón ...cuando mi papa murio, y lo teniamos tendido, entonces todavía vivía el hermano más joven de mi mamá, ...lo vé y dice, 'puro indio.'" Her own family ostracized her father, Sam Tenayuca, because he was "puro Indio." Her father responded to these attacks stating that "if he knew he had Spanish blood he would cut open his veins." Emma Tenayuca identified with and embraced the mestizaje. [http://www.texancultures.com/library/tenayucaInterview.htm]

WOMAN. Hard to believe but women didn't have the right to vote until 1920. Speaking of the economic condition of the women workers, Emma recalled: "...it's only recently that I have been able to talk about some of the things that I saw here as far as poverty. The poverty was just too difficult...So, the cigar strikers were among the first; they were women. It's peculiar; it's the women-I mean COPS women-it's the women who have led. And I just have a feeling, a very strong feeling, that if ever this world is civilized that it would be more the work of women. And their fatigue, you see, is coming home to children... The dual role; it's difficult. And I don't think that women or any of the minorities will ever be completely and totally free until you have socialism." [Tenayuca Interview]

CATHOLIC. The Ku Klux Klan was very active against Catholics as well as Mexicanos. Emma recalled, "Now, I would say I have a faint recollection of hooded parades or something like that. I mean, I remember something that was read by my grandfather, and it always stayed in my mind-only 100% white



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Protestant Americans, you see. Oh, the Klan was very, very strong here, particularly on this side of town... I had a priest who ...had seen ... the antipathy towards Catholics... He tried to tell us, tried to teach us that we were living in a Protestant country." [http://www.texancultures.com/library/tenayucaInterview.htm]

LABOR ORGANIZER. Tenayuca's introduction into the world of politics began at age six at La Plaza de Zacate accompanying her grandfather on Sundays listening to the political plática of Mexicanos who fled the Mexican Revolution. Not yet out of high school, Emma began organizing workers. She recalled, "I saw my first strike activity during the Finck Cigar Strike, Sheriff Albert West bragged that he was going to greet the strikers with his new boots." Her anger at the idea of women being kicked spurred Emma to action. "The attitude of the establishment led me to activism." At age 16 she was arrested for the first time at the Finck Cigar Strike of 1933. She helped form locals of the Ladies' Garment Workers and began to organize the unemployed and marginally employed from 1936-1938 with the Workers Alliance. 1938 was a disastrous year for migratory workers. The starvation level of poverty impelled the momentum of the Workers' Alliance (WA). The main source of employment for migratory workers during the winter was pecan shelling. Joe Freeman of the Joe Freeman Coliseum was in the lucrative pecan-shelling business. The "bosses" took advantage of the cheap Depression labor pool of Mexican migrant workers. The Pecan Shellers strike was the culmination of organizing. After appeals, demonstrations and mass meetings, the strike was on.

Emma was the guiding spirit for the pecan shelling workers and was elected the strikers' spokesperson on the first night of the strike. In 1938, she led 12,000 pecan shellers in a strike. Emma became the leader of the labor movement affecting the city's largest industry, pecan shelling. Emma Tenayuca was in the jails, in the courtrooms, and on the front pages. It was right that she would be called "La Pasionara." The national spotlight Emma cast on the Pecan Shellers Strike had the Fair Labor Standards Act passed in 1938. Emma explained, "We did raise placards for a minimum raise. This was why the strike gained [National] prominence." She concludes, "We started a movement here." The sight of 12,000 Mexicanas striking had never been seen before. Tenayuca a Mexican American mujer taking to the streets was an attack on the foundations of the

racial, class, and gendered caste system of San Antonio's political machine. On January 31, 1938 the SAPD arrested Tenayuca for her role in organizing the pecan sheller's strike. The CIA removed her as strike leader because Emma was a communist.

COMMUNIST. The Municipal Auditorium Riot and Exile: Police Chief Kilday refused to give Emma a city permit to strike or to march in protest of unfair wages. He said that there were no strikers just communist agitators. SAPD Chief Kilday used an obscure city ordinance to arrest thousands carrying signs, unless the strikers had a city permit. In 1939 Mayor Maverick granted a city permit to Tenayuca, a Communist, to meet at the Municipal Auditorium. Many demanded that Mayor Maverick rescind the permit. The Mayor refused. Outrage erupted on August 25, 1939, an anti-communist mob of 5,000 strong gathered outside the Municipal Auditorium. The frustrated mob burned the mayor in effigy at city hall. Besides receiving death threats, Tenayuca was also blacklisted. She recalled: "When I left here, about '48, '49, I couldn't have gotten a job; I couldn't obtain a job; I couldn't do anything. None of the unions would have me, although they sought my help when they got out on strike—laundry workers, cement workers, etc. Again, I continued to help, but ... I was beginning to miss more and more meals. I've come from a family of eleven; I was one of the oldest. I couldn't get a job; I couldn't help; I couldn't do anything, so I left San Antonio. I went to San Francisco and stayed there for twenty years, and to my surprise, I return, and I find myself some sort of a heroine."

Emma Tenayuca's sacrifices included jail and exile. But Emma and her struggles for justice on behalf of the pecan shellers and other groups is remembered. Who remembers the boss Mayor Quin or Police Chief Owen Kilday? On January 31, 1938, the day of her "grito" for justicia, Emma crossed into history. La Pasionara, Mexicana, mujer, India, with all her devalued identities wasn't supposed to speak at all. Emma, La Voz de Esperanza for Mexicans, immigrants, migrants, workers, and the poor is still speaking with "a shrill little voice [that] would make your spine tingle." [Latane Lambert. *Women in the Texas Workforce*, *People's History in Texas, Inc.*, 1979). Her voice lives in all women who speak out in the name of justice. Come honor the legacy of Emma Tenayuca and march on International Woman's Day!

Bio: Dee Villarubia is a local activist and freelance writer in San Antonio.

Chief Marie Smith Jones

Many nations are mourning the passing of Chief Marie Smith Jones, 89, the last full-blooded Eyak and last Native speaker of the Eyak language in Alaska. Chief Marie, a well-known activist took on her own Native corporation in a fight against clear-cutting on ancestral lands near Cordova. She oversaw the repatriation of bones when the Smithsonian Institution was forced to give them back and spoke at the United Nations on issues of peace and indigenous cultures. With her death, the Eyak language becomes extinct.



Frances Bravo Quiroz



Frances Bravo Quiroz born Oct. 26, 1926 died February 8, 2008. Our deepest sympathy to her family and friends. Sra. Quiroz was a well known San Antonio artist creating small to large quilts primarily with the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe. She was an annual vendor with the Esperanza Peace Market. She leaves a legacy of her art in our memorias, homes and galerias. Que en paz descance.