

A nation at war is capable both of ignoring domestic issues, and of exhibiting intolerance toward nontraditional behavior. Such was the case in East Los Angeles, where a quiet rebellion against American values and lifestyles surfaced during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Youthful members of the second generation, the principal figures in this rebellion, expressed their estrangement from American society by forming cliques or gangs. Carey McWilliams, noted author and attorney, remarked that these individuals, "rebuffed in the schools and in the community," have "been made to feel that they do not belong, that they are Mexicans, not Americans, and that they will never be accepted as equals."¹⁶ Poor schooling and problems with the law kept many of them out of the armed services, and prejudice denied them equal opportunity in the work sector. The early gang members from this era were recognizable by their dress styles, use of English and Spanish slang words or a combination of both, and tattoo marks on their hands and arms. In the early 1940s they began to sport zoot suits, long ducktail haircuts, and pointed shoes. Many of them hung around pool halls and gathered on the weekends at local dance halls. They called themselves "Chucos," short for the word *Pachuco*. The police and the press preferred to call them hoodlums or "zoot suiters."¹⁷

Relations between young men from the Eastside Barrio and police authorities had been poor long before the body of José Díaz was found on August 2, 1942, at a barrio swimming hole popularly known as "Sleepy Lagoon." Although the exact cause of death was never determined, members of the 38th Street gang had been reported in the vicinity on the night of Díaz' death. The police arrested twenty-two members of the gang, charging all of them with conspiracy to commit murder. The mass trial which followed, unprecedented in U.S. judicial history, gained national attention and provoked new anti-Mexican sentiments in the Los Angeles community. Captain Ed Durán Ayres of the Foreign Relations Bureau of the Los Angeles Police Department testified that "while Anglos fought with the fists, Mexicans generally preferred to kill, or at least let blood." The court found three defendants guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced them to San Quentin Prison for varying terms. Nine more defendants were found guilty of second-degree murder and two counts of assault. Five were convicted of lesser offenses, and some of these served time in the Los Angeles County Jail. Five were acquitted on all counts. The East Los Angeles community organized the Sleepy

RICARDO RAYGO,
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Lagoon Defense Committee, and the convictions were appealed. The District Court of Appeals found the trial judge biased against the defendants and overturned the convictions. On October 4, 1944, all the defendants who remained in jail were freed as a result of the appeals court's reversal of the guilty verdicts.¹⁸

The rejoicing that followed lasted but a short time, as youths from the east side soon fell into conflict with soldiers and sailors stationed in the city. The origins of the "zoot suit riots" which occurred in Los Angeles during the first week of June 1943 have never been clear. Young Mexican Americans had clashed with members of the armed services on numerous occasions in the downtown section of Los Angeles; the press had been virulent in its presentation of Mexican American gang activity.¹⁹ Enlisted men from the camps considered the youngsters from the barrio as draft dodgers. Mexican Americans resented the constant traffic of soldiers and sailors in their community. A major confrontation began on the evening of June 3, 1943, when sailors looking for a fight with Mexican gang members attacked several of them near a dance hall in Venice. Rumors that Mexican hoodlums had started the fight brought hundreds of marines and sailors into the barrio and downtown section of Los Angeles that evening. Over the next few days, more fights followed. Mexican Americans wearing zoot suits were stripped of their clothing and beaten. The mob, which grew larger every night, marched through the downtown area in search of Mexican zoot suiters, but Blacks and Filipinos were also attacked. At one theatre, the mob stormed into the building, switched the lights on, and dragged out persons they considered zoot suiters. The riots stopped when the commanding officers of the local bases placed the downtown section and the barrio off limits. This was done only after the Mexican government put pressure on officials in Washington to quell the disturbances, and the State Department, which was aware of the negative international attention that the riots were receiving, ordered the Navy and Marine Corps to act since it appeared that local Los Angeles officials would not.²⁰

Mexican Americans accounted for one-fifth of the total casualties from Los Angeles in World War II, although they comprised only one-tenth of the city's population. Some of the GIs returned as heroes to the barrio. Private José Martínez, who died in the Philippines, had a local post of the American Legion in Los Angeles named after him. Nationwide, Mexican Americans returned as the most decorated ethnic group in the armed services, winning seventeen Medals of Honor.²¹ Those who did not receive Medals of Honor often

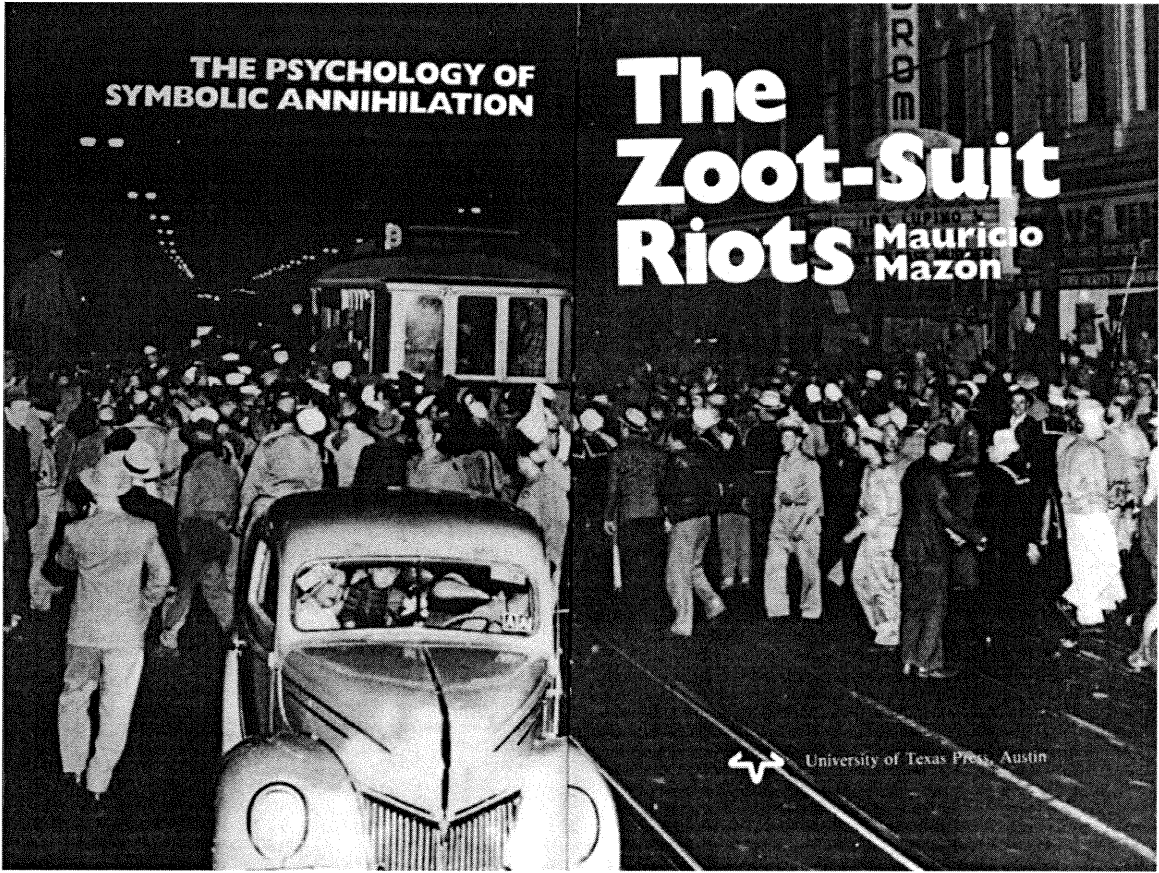
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gained in other ways from their experiences in the service. Many soon applied the skills that they learned while in uniform to civilian life.

When Mexican American servicemen returned, they discovered that the east side had undergone profound changes. The Sleepy Lagoon case and the "zoot suit riots" were still fresh in the minds of most residents, as was the internment of Japanese Americans from the neighboring communities. The defense of the Mexican American youths involved in the Sleepy Lagoon case had unleashed a new political awareness among eastside residents. This new political stirring was apparent when thirty residents of East Los Angeles organized the Community Service Organization (CSO). Unlike the mutual aid or voluntary associations of the previous generation, the CSO claimed no allegiance to Mexico, nor did its members assign a leadership role to the local Mexican consul. One of its early leaders was Edward Roybal, a college graduate and veteran of World War II.²²

Unquestionably, the Mexican American veterans gave the eastside community a new political profile in the immediate postwar years. The old political climate began to change with the veterans' persistent challenging of Jim Crow laws and discriminatory practices. In Los Angeles as well as across the Southwest, when a Mexican American veteran or war hero was denied service in a restaurant or burial in the local cemetery, there was likely to be some press coverage. Veterans became indignant over these occurrences; they felt they deserved better treatment for having served in defense of their country. In East Los Angeles some of the veterans formed a chapter of the American GI Forum, a Mexican American organization founded in Texas by World War II veterans.²³

In the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the barrio residents of Los Angeles and surrounding communities found an ally in challenging the segregation of children in the public schools. Parents from several southern California communities banded together in 1945 to sue the Westminster School District for placing their children in segregated classrooms. The Mexican American parents won their case in the courts and gained an additional victory on June 14, 1946, when Governor Earl Warren signed into law a repeal of the last remaining school segregation statutes in California's Educational Code.²⁴ Although the case would set an important precedent in other states, the court ruling still had limitations, since it did not affect de facto segregation which prevailed in barrio communities such as East Los Angeles. Nonetheless, it was an important first step for Mexican Americans.



SLEEPY LAGOON

The Original Photographs



Defendants in San Quentin

Zoot Suit — 38th St. — Sleepy Lagoon — the Pachuco Riots. For many of us — we weren't even born during that era.

The pictures in these pages are history come to life. We are indebted to the Leyvas family for providing these priceless photographs and documents. The movie ZOOT SUIT revolves around the true life character — Henry Leyvas.

Although the movie ZOOT SUIT revolves around the Leyvas family — an actual movie could be made solely on the legacy of the Leyvas family. From Villistas to the Sleepy Lagoon — to active members of the Chicano Movement — the Leyvas family has certainly left their mark in Chicano history books.

In 1979, Luis Valdez of the Teatro Campesino took the infamous Sleepy Lagoon out of the history books and brought it to life by making it the basis for ZOOT SUIT — one of L.A.'s most successful plays ever.

Prior to the success of the play, the Sleepy Lagoon remained mostly in the memories of the veteranos and in history books like Carey McWilliams' *North From Mexico* and Rudy Acuna's *Occupied America*.

The Sleepy Lagoon Case revolved around a murder which occurred on August 2, 1942. Hundreds of Chicanos were picked up for questioning, resulting in the arrest and conviction of 22 Chicanos from 38th Street. Not until October 4, 1944 was the decision reversed. After two and a half years of serving time, the Sleepy Lagoon defendants were finally free.

These pages from our history were captured by Luis Valdez — first through his successful play — and then through the recently released movie.

The play and the movie are equally as important as the event itself. ZOOT SUIT is a historic breakthrough because it is written and directed by a Chicano. It is an epic.

As far as Henry Leyvas — when he died — he was buried with full honors by the Brown Berets — a tribute to a true Chicano warrior .