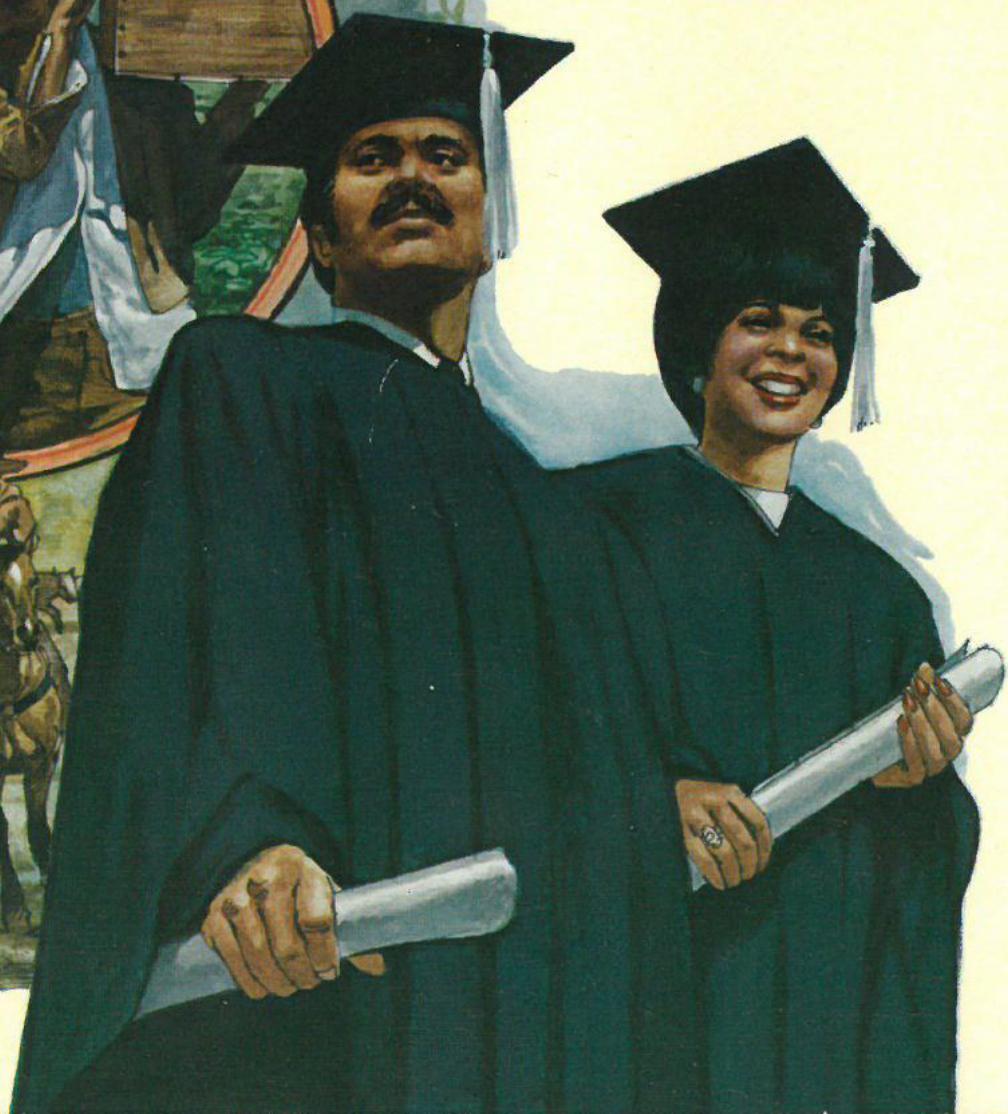


FRESNO'S HISPANIC HERITAGE



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CHAPTER 5

LA DEPRESIÓN, LAS GUERRAS MUNDIALES Y LA COMUNIDAD MEXICANA

Las condiciones pésimas durante la gran depresión de los treinta destruyeron mucho del progreso hecho en la década antes de 1930. Sin embargo, el mexicano no perdió su empeño, y cuando los Estados Unidos necesitaron soldados durante la segunda guerra mundial, la colonia mexicana se distinguió por su servicio en las fuerzas militares norteamericanas. En este tiempo, la comunidad mexicana siguió su desarrollo sin perder su orgullo de ser mexicanos, su apreciación de sus tradiciones y costumbres. Además, la continuación de emigrantes mexicanos fortificó el ambiente cultural y social de la colonia mexicana.

HARDTIMES AND WARTIME, 1930-1950

I

“Todo era de la pura fregada.” (Everything was very hard.)

With such words, an elderly woman recalled the impact of the Depression on the Mexican community of the central valley.⁵⁰ If the Depression hurt “big business,” the effects on the “little guy” can at best only be imagined. Agricultural production in the Valley dropped as prices plummeted in the wake of the Great Crash. While the New Deal programs of the Roosevelt administration offered some relief, farmers faced a dismal situation. The consequences for Mexicans in the Valley were equally severe.

The Depression dislodged thousands from their homes, businesses and land. The haunting reality of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* was only too true for many Americans. Displaced sharecroppers, tenants, farmers and farmworkers streamed into areas that offered possibilities of employment. Droughts, dust storms, floods served to add others to the movement of people in search of work. A job—any job—was apt to touch off a heated contest. The desperation of workers often matched that of employers. Frustration, dependence, exploitation understandably flourished in such an environment.

Low profits inevitably yielded low wages. Fearful of losing their land, farmers attempted to maximize their often meager returns—the pay

offered to farmworkers declined as the availability of work dwindled. The competition for jobs only worsened the conditions of workers. For some, circumstances ultimately led to outrage and rebelliousness. For others, the concern over security overwhelmed the desire to protest or to strike. It was a painful dilemma: to fight for decent pay or to hold on to the little one had.

Mexicans responded in various ways to the Depression. Those with property struggled to maintain their holdings, produced as much of their own needs as possible, and hoped for the return of prosperity. Others joined the thousands seeking employment, at times, only to return jobless to the Valley. Still others fought for better working conditions, participated in strikes, and destroyed the myth of the "passive" Mexican in the labor confrontations of the 1930s in Pixly, Corcoran, Madera and in other localities. In many cases, Mexicans eked out an existence in the depressed economy of the San Joaquin Valley.

The ugly specter of prejudice again reared its head. In hard-hit urban areas, the unemployed looked for scapegoats; "foreigners" became convenient targets. In cities with large concentrations of Mexicans, deportation pressures mounted. From Chicago to Los Angeles, in varying degrees of intensity, "repatriation" drives occurred. Mexicans were induced, at times coerced, into returning to Mexico. On the other hand, the need for cheap labor led government officials to minimize such efforts in agricultural areas. In short, the experiences of Mexicans during the Depression varied according to the circumstances of the individuals involved.

The Salazar family of Selma journeyed to the Midwest on the eve of the depression. For five years José María Salazar worked in the steel mills of Chicago. Repatriation pressures pushed the Salazars to Calexico in 1935. That same year, the family returned to the valley, toiled in the cotton camps near Corcoran, and eventually established permanent roots in the west side of Selma. A small restaurant soon arose next to their modest home—the beginnings of Sal's Restaurant were in the making.⁵¹

For José "Red" Ramirez, a founding member of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8900, the Depression was spent in the Borden area near Madera. Pleasures were few: listening to the radio, (Amos n' Andy, Jack Benny), Saturday night dances, a swim at Skaggs Bridge on summer evenings, and money permitting, a movie at the Rex Theater on Sundays.⁵² If one had an especially prosperous week, one could even invite a girl along to see *los monos* (movies).

Nearby, Geronimo Manzanarez was starting a new job. A former employee of the Sugar Pine Lumber Company, he was forced to seek another job when his children reached school age—no schools existed close enough to the Manzanarez mountain home to send them to school. He soon landed a job on the Greenleaf Ranch near the San Joaquin River, and near schools for his children. At the time, few people would have

guessed that his eldest son would graduate from UCLA, become a pediatrician, and establish a medical research company years later.⁵³

Barely five years of age in 1930, Robert Campos helped in his own way around the family farm. The '30s meant families getting together, sharing resources, enjoying an occasional picnic among friends, and sometimes introducing a young "city kid" by the name of Michael Cardenas to the mysteries of the "country." Passersby had little idea a future insurance executive and certified public accountant were "running around" the fields near Clovis.⁵⁴



Future Ambassador Phillip Sanchez conducts a meeting of the Gaona Club, a prominent Fresno social club of the late 1930s and 1940s. Many eminent community leaders of the future were members, including those dressed in "drag" in this photograph.



Mexican farmers in the Valley, circa 1940s: an occupation not usually identified with Mexicans in the Fresno area.

For others, the Depression led to a return to Mexico. An eight-year-old child remembers only his arrival in Chihuahua and his consequent education in Mexican schools. Much later, his father, Francisco Villegas, would tell him of "repatriation" and of the country where Fidel was born. But Fidel, his father, and the family would return later to build a multi-million dollar food products business. Appropriately, it carried the name of their adopted Mexican "home"—Chihuahua.⁵⁵

Years of hard work and sacrifice had tempered the Mexican community. However poor, their spirit remained unbroken. The festivities for the Virgen de Guadalupe continued every December 12th. Dancers performed *el Jarabe Tapatio*, accompanied by *mariachi* music, and applauded by large, appreciative audiences. Various organizations carried on their activities, albeit less elaborate than in the past. The *Alianza Hispanoamericana*, the *Sociedad Morelos*, *Club Trece*, and the Gaona Club provided welcomed moments of gaiety through the dances and gatherings they sponsored.⁵⁶

For generations that followed, the realities of the Depression were difficult to appreciate. Mexican immigrants arrived with high hopes and had begun to reap the fruits of their labor. The Depression must have been a shock. Only in conversation does one begin to grasp the hardship of the era, and more importantly, the strength of the people who endured it. One must admire the perseverance of that generation.

II

The Depression slowly lessened its grip on the nation and the Valley. Between 1930 and 1935, Fresno County farmland declined by nearly 430,000 acres. By 1940, however, acreage figures had practically reached pre-depression levels.⁵⁷ Given the importance of agriculture to the Valley, the increases in crop acreage implied a general improvement in the area's economy. Still, as late as 1941, the country counted six million people out of work.

Events elsewhere suddenly brought prosperity to the Valley. War ultimately turned the economy around and confirmed its recovery. As it turned out, prosperity was bought at a costly price.

The war had important consequences for Mexicans in general, and for the San Joaquin Valley in particular. First, thousands of Mexicans entered the armed services. For many, it was the first systematic contact with American social customs, habits and attitudes. Second, the war effort led to the importation of Mexican nationals, many of whom remained in the U.S. Third, the massive propaganda effort stimulated by the war proved to be a very effective form of acculturation, i.e., Americanization. Fourth, the war experience provided Mexicans with a greater sense of being an "American" that years of prejudice had too often prevented. The effects of these developments eventually produced important results in the post-war period.



Octavio Garcia, with saxophone, left southern Texas to find work as a migrant farm laborer; but he eventually formed one of the most popular bands in the Fresno area with his sons Eladio, Beto and Alonso (to the right of Don Octavio).



A major focal point of social life in the Mexican community of Fresno in the 1950s was the Rainbow Ballroom which superseded the old Palomar Ballroom on Kearney Boulevard.

The distinguished record of the Mexican soldier was unparalleled in WW II, and later, in Korea. As Raul Morin's book; *Among the Valiant*, clearly demonstrated, the bravery of the Mexican G.I. earned the praise of the entire country.⁵⁸ In fact, the military contribution of the Mexican community to the nation went far back into history. Mexicans from California, for example, served in the Union army during the Civil War, and, in the case of Fresno county, Paul Gutierrez was among those killed in action in WW I.

The number of Medals of Honor bestowed upon Mexican soldiers perhaps best indicated their valor. Indeed, "they had the highest proportion of Congressional Medal of Honor winners of any minority in the United States."⁵⁹ In the Pacific, in Europe, and in Korea, Mexicans served with distinction.

The Valley was not without its own heroes. On May 31, 1951, Hill 420 in Wonton-ni was hit by a mass attack that forced American troops to retreat. Unaware of the order to disengage the enemy, Rodolfo Hernandez maintained his position until he ran out of ammunition. In hand-to-hand combat, Hernandez continued to fight. Finally, after suffering severe head wounds, he collapsed. Unknown to him, he had stopped the



Rodolfo Hernandez of Fowler, Congressional Medal of Honor winner, is congratulated by the late president John F. Kennedy at a White House reception.

North Korean advance. Still alive, Rodolfo Hernandez was carried off the battle field and eventually recovered from his wounds. The town of Fowler, where he grew up, had produced one of the nation's greatest heroes.⁶⁰

The deeds of Mexicans in various wartime theaters were matched by the important, though unheralded, efforts made at home to supply the "boys" overseas. The Valley quickly sought a new source of labor to replace the workers lost to the war. Farmers' organizations and newspaper editorials shortly clamored for the importation of Mexican labor. Thus, the *Bracero* Program was born; not surprisingly, the arrival of Mexican nationals captured the headlines of Valley newspapers in 1943.

The Mexican community found its spirit renewed and its pride heightened through the war effort. If the war lessened the sense of separateness between Mexicans and American society, the war also brought Mexicans closer to American popular culture. Everything from pancakes and hashed browns, to Betty Grable and Tommy Dorsey, American social forms penetrated deeply into the Mexican community. Though Mexicans added their own flair, there was no denying the origins of dress, music and dances of the '40s that appeared in *barrios* (neighborhoods) throughout the Valley.

At dances at the Palomar in Fresno, the Casadome near Selma, Duncan Hall in Madera, and others, the songs and sounds of Glenn Miller often alternated with the *boleros* (romantic ballads) made famous by Mexican singers such as Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante and Pedro Vargas. Until he left for military service in 1945, Robert A. Campos recalled that the Gaona Club in particular "got the best bands around" to play at the most popular ballroom in the Central Valley, the famous Palomar on Kearney Boulevard. Tommy Dorsey and Xavier Cugat, for instance, shared the stage with the outstanding local orchestras of that era, such as those led by Manuel Contreras and Andy Guerrero.⁶¹

Returning soldiers came home with much more than American cultural tastes; they also learned new skills, took advantage of opportunities, and went back to school. The Mexican community seemed determined to fulfill the hopes and dreams of its parents. Thwarted by the depression, slowed by the war, the return to "normalcy" allowed Mexicans to resume their socioeconomic ascent.