

“Mexican-American History & Culture in 20th Century Houston” Mural

The Heritage Society’s mural stands proudly outside our museum in Sam Houston Park. Entitled *Mexican-American History & Culture in 20th Century Houston*, it spotlights key places, concepts, personalities and events in our history and provides long overdue recognition for the contributions of Mexican-Americans. Two prominent local artists, **Jesse Sifuentes** and **Laura Lopez Cano**, employed traditional Hispanic styles to tell the stories of this vital Houston community. Set against the dramatic backdrop of City Hall and the downtown skyline, this cultural landmark in the very heart of downtown is something we can all take pride in.

Primary subjects from left to right include:

1. Family Abuelo/a – Many of the early immigrants left behind family in Mexico, and this represents the close embrace of grandparents and family.

2. LULAC Council 60 Clubhouse – This nationally important chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens was founded in the East End in 1934, but it was at this clubhouse on Bagby Street that the group reached the peak of its national power. Many major advances for Hispanics were discussed and voted on inside this still extant building.

3. Railroad workers – Many of the immigrants to Houston found work on the railroads. Southern Pacific was Houston’s largest employer for over half a century, and Mexican-American workers helped make this and other lines thrive.

4-6. Graduates – Three graduates show the value that many in the Mexican-American community place on education. The gentlemen are **P.L. Nino** and **Francisco Chairez**, the first two Hispanic graduates of Rice Institute in 1928. The woman is **Maria Jimenez**, the first Latina student body president at the University of Houston and a civil rights advocate starting in the early 1970s.

7. Baseball player – Baseball was an important recreational activity in the Mexican-American community. The team uniform depicted on the mural is that of Mexican Inn, an all-Hispanic, early-1930s ball club financed by **Felix Tijerina** to promote his first restaurant.

8. Longshoremen – The exodus from Mexico began at a time when Houston was deepening the Ship Channel and building many new industries along its banks. Many of the Hispanic newcomers found work relating to the Port of Houston.

9. De Zavala School – Today, HISD’s De Zavala Elementary is flourishing on Canal Street. It began as a school in the separate Harrisburg school district and was segregated for children of Mexican descent, many of whom spoke Spanish at home. There were protests over this from the neighborhood’s Latino residents. The Harrisburg district was absorbed by HISD about 1926, and that district did not have a written policy of segregation for Hispanic students, though several HISD schools were largely Mexican-American due to the neighborhood population.

10. Ninfa Laurenzo – She and her husband operated a tortilla factory on Navigation Boulevard which she later converted into a small restaurant. She popularized fajita tacos, creating a passionate following in Houston and forever changing menus across America. Ninfa also worked for community causes in health and education and was active in Republican politics thanks to her friendship with the Bush family.

11. Family reading – This scene highlights the importance of both family and education to the newly arrived Mexican immigrants and their descendants.

12. Azteca Theatre – Without the busy Eastex Freeway acting as a barrier, there was an area in what we would today consider east downtown that contained Spanish language-friendly businesses catering to the Mexican descended families in El Segundo Barrio. Among those was the Azteca Theatre that showed movies in Spanish, the first such establishment in Houston.

13. Pan America Ballroom – Hispanic Houstonians of a certain generation or two often say that much of their lives revolved around the Pan America Ballroom on North Main. Top musical acts from the Southwest and Mexico were booked into the packed nightclub. (Please check out our HAM Slice of History video on this important venue.)

14. KLVV Radio – The first full time Spanish language radio station on the Gulf Coast, KLVV was started by **Felix and Angie Morales** in 1950. It was not only a media outlet but served the Hispanic community in many other important ways including a weekly program designed to get jobs for unemployed area residents.

15. Lydia Mendoza – This Houston native was the first Queen of Tejano music, performing to great fanfare across the Southwest U.S. and Mexico. Her star was brightest from the 1930s to the 1950s, but she continued playing for many more years. She carried the nickname La Alondra de la Frontera (The Meadowlark of the Border.)

16. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church – It was established in 1912 as the first Catholic church in Houston to give mass in Spanish. The iconic red brick building on Navigation was constructed in the 1920s. The church and school have provided a wide range of services to the surrounding neighborhood for over a century, and Our Lady of Guadalupe well deserves its reputation as the Mother Church of Houston’s Mexican descended community.

17-18. The Zentenos – **Roberto Zenteno** and his daughter **Norma** were both important fixtures of an entertainment and musical family. Roberto was a legendary trumpet player who led popular big bands, and his daughter began writing and performing at age 11. She is depicted as a young girl in the mural. Both father and daughter left a positive mark on the Houston music scene.

19. Newsboy and newspapers – Not only orphans, but sons of families who could not afford to care for them, worked as newsboys on street corners around Houston. There was even a 300-bed newsboys home on the west side of downtown where many of them lived, and HISD offered special night classes so these working pre-teens could get an education. The newspapers shown represent some of the early Spanish language periodicals available around town. (Please check out our HAM Slice of History video on early newsboys.)

Stores and houses – Some of the houses and stores are representative of those used and owned by immigrants and Mexican-Americans in El Segundo Barrio (Second Ward) and farther east toward Magnolia Park.

20. Rusk Settlement House – The Settlement House movement came to Houston thanks to a combination of civic minded women and passionate school teachers. This large building opened on the campus of Rusk School on the northeast edge of today’s downtown in 1907. Originally serving mostly Eastern European families, it soon became a supplier of vital services for new immigrants from Mexico. It is the forerunner of Neighborhood Centers, Inc.

21. Tatcho Mindiola – Longtime professor at the University of Houston, Tatcho helped organize the Center for Mexican American Studies and led it for many years. In his early days on campus, he was an activist for multiple causes to advance the situation of Mexican-Americans.

22. Macario Garcia – An immigrant from Mexico, Garcia was a farm worker in Sugar Land prior to enlisting in the Army during WWII. He was in Germany in November 1944 when his unit was pinned down. Acting alone on his own initiative, he destroyed two enemy machine gun emplacements and the soldiers manning them in spite of being wounded himself. For these acts, he was awarded the Medal of Honor, the first ever Mexican immigrant to be so recognized. One month later, in east Fort Bend County, he was denied service in a café and beaten with a baseball bat by the owner. No charges were ever filed against the owner, but it created a national stir.

23. Felix Fraga – As a youth, Felix benefitted greatly from the work done at the Rusk Settlement House and as an adult, led the associated Ripley House for 20 years. After serving two terms on the HISD Board and a decade on Houston City Council, he went to work for Neighborhood Centers, Inc., the lineal descendant of the same settlement house that gave much to his family.

24. Leonel Castillo – By winning the race for city controller in 1972, Castillo became the first Mexican-American elected to citywide office. At the end of that decade, he became the first Hispanic to serve as United States Commissioner of Immigration when he was appointed by President Carter.

25. Christina Morales – The granddaughter of the Morales family who started Morales Funeral Home and KLVV radio, Christina is active in several civic causes in the city. She is portrayed as our parade queen.

26. Yolanda Black Navarro – She was a longtime community leader for Houston Hispanics, running non-profits and also serving on the METRO board, the Houston Parks Board and multiple business organizations supporting the East End. An HISD school is named in her honor.

27. Irma Galvan – Raised in Houston, she started her own restaurant after her husband’s murder in 1982. It has grown and remained a popular eatery in northeast downtown ever since.

28. Joe Padilla – In 1942, this sailor became the first Houstonian to lose his life in military action during WWII.

29. Felix Mexican Restaurant – The Felix chain operated for some 60 years and had multiple locations, but the one on Westheimer just east of Montrose was the last one, shuttering in 2008, and arguably the best known. There remain devotees of their chile con queso recipe to this day.

Dancers – Mexican dance traditions are represented as part of the parade.

Riders – Texas inherits its horse and cowboy culture from the Spanish. The traditionally-clad riders are also a nod to some of the Hispanic trail ride groups that take part annually in the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo.

30. Joe Campos Torres – A 23-year old Vietnam veteran, Torres was murdered by Houston police officers after being arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct at a bar in 1977. Two of the six officers involved were found guilty but ultimately sentenced to probation on state charges and less than a year on federal charges. The outrage galvanized the Hispanic community like nothing seen in Houston before and led to the Moody Park Riot on Cinco de Mayo weekend one year later.

31. Vaquero Statue – This iconic Luis Jimenez statue resides in Moody Park on Fulton St. on the near Northside. There is also a copy in Washington, D.C. Among other academic stops, Jimenez taught at the University of Houston.

32. Gracie Saenz – Serving from 1992-98, this attorney was the first Latina on Houston City Council.

Low riders – The best low riders, or slabs, often take part in Houston’s Art Car Parade and grace our mural, as well.

33. Felix Tijerina – Emigrating from Nuevo Leon with his family of migrant workers, Tijerina worked as a busboy starting at age 13 and taught himself English. He opened his first Houston restaurant in 1929, lost it to the Depression, and then started again in 1937 on Westheimer. His story was one of diplomatic assimilation to American society, and he went on to be a major Houston community leader. He served four consecutive terms as national president of LULAC, championed education and voter drives, and started the School of the 400, a concept designed to teach English to non-English speaking preschoolers and the program that inspired Lyndon Johnson’s Head Start.

34-37. Kennedy/Johnson presidential party – President **John F. Kennedy**, Vice President **Lyndon B. Johnson** and their wives were in Houston on Thursday, November 21, 1963 along with Texas Governor **John Connally** and over half a dozen member of the Texas Congressional Delegation. They were in town attending a banquet honoring Houston Congressman **Albert Thomas**, but before they headed to their rooms at the Rice Hotel for some pre-banquet relaxation, the group stopped in to the ballroom where LULAC Council 60 was holding an event. They were greeted by shouts of “Viva Kennedy” and feted by mariachis. In turn, the President, Vice President and First Lady **Jackie Kennedy** spoke, the latter in Spanish. It was the first time in history that a sitting U.S. President addressed a Hispanic civil rights group. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas the following day.

38. John J. Herrera – Introducing the Presidential Party that night in 1963 was Houston attorney John J. Herrera. His role in the civil rights movement can be compared to Thurgood Marshall in many ways. He won cases to end workplace discrimination, school segregation and jury service exclusion on behalf of Mexican-Americans. Herrera also served as national LULAC president.