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A More Inclusive History of El Paso

YOLANDA CHÁVEZ LEYVA

In El Paso, Texas, the landscape is powerful, shaped by ancient mountains, the Chihuahuan desert with its pungent creosote and orange-tipped *ocotillo* plants, and the often dry Rio Grande/Rio Bravo rivers that serves as the boundary between the United States and Mexico. Just as compelling are the urban landscapes of its earliest Mexican American neighborhoods, where red brick replaced adobe following the arrival of the railroads in the 1880s and where block-long, one-story apartment buildings are called *presidios* (forts) because they reminded people of military barracks. I grew up in the 1960s and '70s hearing stories of iconic tenements like *El Barco de la Ilusión* (The Boat of Hope) and *Los Siete Infiernos* (The Seven Hells), imagining that, for Mexican immigrants at the turn of the 20th century, life here on the border could hold both hope and hell.

As our concept of historic preservation expands to include not just the physical and built environment but, as importantly, the social and cultural histories associated with specific spaces, these early immigrant neighborhoods are at the heart of that evolving definition.¹ Efforts to ensure that preservation moves toward full and authentic representation must capture stories that have previously been overlooked. In often-neglected neighborhoods, like El Segundo Barrio—one of the oldest immigrant neighborhoods in El Paso and arguably one of the most significant in the Southwest—buildings embody rich and complex histories and memories. Public and social historians are important allies in the effort to recover these histories through archival research and by listening to community members who hold this knowledge. Engaging and learning from underrepresented and marginalized communities helps develop an increasingly accurate and inclusive account of our collective history, strengthening the preservation field.



An 1886 lithograph map of El Paso by Augustus Koch.

[IMAGE IS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN.](#)

EL SEGUNDO BARRIO

El Segundo Barrio, or the Second Ward, developed in the late 19th century. An 1886 birds-eye-view map of El Paso by Augustus Koch shows its beginning south of the railroad tracks and north of the river. Some of the buildings on that map still exist, although their facades have changed over time, and several lots depicted as vacant would later house such significant institutions as Sacred Heart (Sagrado Corazón) Catholic Church and parochial school. Referred to as the Ellis Island of the Southwest, El Segundo Barrio of El Paso welcomed more Mexican immigrants than any other port of entry for much of the 20th century. People across the United States can trace their familial roots here, to the tenements of El Segundo.

From a nascent immigrant neighborhood in the 1880s, El Segundo became the most densely populated area of the city by the early 20th century. As the Southwest economy grew with the

arrival of the railroads and the spread of commercial agriculture and mining-related industries, Mexican workers were drawn to employment in El Paso and other Southwestern cities. Within a decade of the 1881 arrival of railroads in El Paso, the population expanded from a few hundred to 10,000. Migration from Mexico surged during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 as well as in the 1920s, which were marked by ongoing violence and instability stemming from the decade-long civil war. By then the population of the city exceeded 100,000. While we often imagine only single, male workers coming from Mexico to work in the Southwest, women and children also migrated, labored, and built the new settlement. In spite of chronic governmental and landlord neglect, the barrio has been the site of important cultural and social history.

THREATS TO THE BARRIO

In 2006 El Segundo Barrio drew attention as the city of El Paso announced a new “downtown revitalization plan.” Created in collaboration with the Paso del Norte Group (PDNG)—headed by wealthy businessmen and developers, including the father-in-law of the first-term city council member representing El Segundo Barrio—the plan was eventually named “Downtown 2015.” It promised to bring new life, entertainment, and work to the downtown through the creation of a *mercado* (market) district capitalizing on Mexican culture as well as mixed-use buildings and new stores. El Pasoans were excited. Within two months of the announcement, however, historian David Dorado Romo published “Not for Distribution: Behind the Demolition Plan,” revealing that the plan also included the demolition of 168 acres of El Segundo Barrio.²

Century-old stereotypes re-emerged during the debates about revitalization and demolition. When the city paid branding firm GlassBeach \$100,000 to research El Paso’s image, the firm presented a report that included a photograph of an older Mexican man with the caption “male, 50-60 years old, gritty, dirty, lazy, speak Spanish and uneducated” to represent El Paso.³

The demolition plan led to a contentious year as developers and the city government confronted opposition from community

residents, activists, small businesses, and scholars. The people and buildings of El Segundo were at the heart of the conflict. Local activists and residents organized to stop the demolition, and historians worked to bring the barrio's history to public attention—particularly to the residents of the neighborhood. In 2006 the grassroots [Museo Urbano](#)⁴ began posting historic photographs of individuals whose stories were linked to specific Segundo Barrio buildings, including Teresita Urrea, a folk saint and healer known as *la Santa de Cabora*, who had been exiled from Mexico as a teenager in 1896 by Porfirio Díaz; Henry Ossian Flipper, the first African American graduate of West Point; and a class from Sagrado Corazón parochial school. In addition, a group of public history students in the University of Texas at El Paso's (UTEP) Department of History produced a bilingual booklet, "El Segundo Barrio: A Living History," which was distributed in the neighborhood and to local libraries. Nonetheless, PDNG members began purchasing properties in El Segundo. While no demolitions have occurred, the plan is still on the books, approved by the city government.

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION'S MUSEUM OF THE STREETS

While other U.S. cities can claim ties to the Mexican Revolution of 1910—a decade-long civil war that killed a million Mexicans and pushed another million to migrate to the United States—it was uniquely transformational for El Paso. Many extant buildings in downtown and south El Paso boast connections to the Revolution. These include the homes of arms dealers, buildings that once housed the flourishing literature of the Revolution, and tenements that provided refuge to revolutionary leaders and thousands of families both fleeing violence and drawn by the economic development of the Southwest. They also include the buildings that housed the provisional Mexican government of Francisco Madero and the consulate of Pancho Villa.

In 2010 the centennial of the Mexican Revolution afforded the city of El Paso another opportunity to work with the community to highlight its history. Under the leadership of its chair, Dr. Paul Edison, UTEP's history department agreed to research, design, and

curate an exhibit at the [El Paso Museum of History](#) in collaboration with the museum's director Julia Bussinger and her staff, particularly curator Barbara Angus. David Dorado Romo's 2005 microhistory, *Ringside Seat to Revolution: Underground Culture in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez*, provided the intellectual foundation for the exhibit.

PUBLIC HISTORY MADE PERSONAL

To prepare for the exhibit, Romo and I co-taught two graduate public history classes and further researched the rich Revolution-era stories. Building on the earlier work of Museo Urbano, we decided to focus on buildings in downtown El Paso and El Segundo Barrio, re-imaging them as artifacts in a museum of the streets. While many of El Paso's historic buildings feature beautiful architectural design and details, our focus was on documenting the stories of the people and historic events connected with those buildings, of which Romo had already identified more than 100. While some students were initially hesitant to research buildings rather than people or events, they soon learned that buildings are more than physical structures. They are vessels that can hold hidden or forgotten histories, and for contemporary residents, they serve as lodestones for memory. As the semester went on, we began to make connections between the individuals and social, economic, and political histories of El Paso and the histories of Mexico and the United States during the 1910s and '20s. Our research demonstrated that the historic buildings of El Segundo Barrio were the cultural and historical patrimony of both nations. Using records such as Sanborn Insurance maps, the U.S. federal census, newspapers, the Historical American Building Survey, city documents, and secondary research on the Mexican Revolution, students delved into the histories of buildings and their residents.

A particularly rich example is the Pablo Baray Apartments, a tenement that is still occupied today. Mariano Azuela, a physician with Pancho Villa, wrote the first great novel of the Mexican Revolution, *Los de Abajo (The Underdogs)*, on a borrowed typewriter in this building. Then editor Fernando Gamiochipi published the novel in serial form in his newspaper, *Paso del Norte*, also run out of Pablo Baray. As we rediscovered the residents who lived and



David Flores mural honoring Pachuco culture.

PHOTO BY DAVID DORADO ROMO

worked in the building, we discovered further literary connections. In 1939 Elisa Gamiochipi (Fernando's daughter) published a little-known serialized novel of the family in a San Antonio newspaper called *La Prensa*. Olga Beatriz Torres, the daughter of *Paso del Norte* co-editor, Elias L. Torres, authored *Memoorias de Mi Viaje/Recollections of My Trip*, describing life during the Revolution. It was not published until 1994.⁵ Once, during a graduate student walking tour, a neighborhood

resident stopped to hear the story of the Pablo Baray building. He asked incredulously, "Can *anyone* live there? It's such a historic building!" The ordinary, two-story brick building represents the most significant literary and journalistic production related to the Mexican Revolution in the United States.

In 2010 Museo Urbano received a grant from the Texas Historical Commission that allowed us to rent two small turn-of-the-20th-century apartments to create a museum at 500 S. Oregon Street, in one of the most historically rich tenements in El Segundo Barrio. The building is at the intersection of the Mexican immigrant barrio, the old Chinatown, and the historic African American neighborhood, and it reflects this juncture of cultures. It had served as, among other things, the Mexican Preparatory School, an African American women's boarding house, and a Chinese laundry. In 2010-11, students and community volunteers worked to paint the apartments. David Flores, a muralist with [Colectivo Rezizte](#), painted a mural in the courtyard of the tenement building honoring Pachuco culture.⁶ Flores was inspired in part by Edmundo Tostado, known professionally as Don Tosti—a renowned musician who composed "Pachuco Boogie,"

the first million-selling single by a Latino composer—who had grown up nearby. And seeing Flores’ mural, young men from the neighborhood volunteered to contribute their own.

It was perhaps at 500 S. Oregon that I came to understand most poignantly how buildings can elicit memories and histories—even ones not linked directly to the specific structure. One morning I went out to say hello to a group of men who sat on our stoop each day—some day laborers, some older men talking with their friends—when an older gentleman pointed out the woodwork on the ceiling of the porch. He described how he could tell that it is handmade, explaining that he had been trained to do that woodwork as a young man in his hometown of Flores Magón, Chihuahua. After he told me his story, I walked him to the back of the tenement where David Flores had stenciled an image of one of the Flores Magón brothers, a leading intellectual at the turn of the 20th century. “That’s who your town is named after,” I told him.

Similarly, when I was sweeping the courtyard one Sunday morning, an older woman asked if she could come in. One of the murals there showed the black United Farm Workers eagle on a simple red background, which reminded her of her youth. From her wallet, she pulled a 1950s farmworker union card and told me about a strike she had participated in while living in California.



Opening day of Museo
Urbano in May 2011.

PHOTO BY DAVID DORADO ROMO

THE BRACEROS AT RIO VISTA FARM

Less than half a mile south of 500 S. Oregon Street is the Centro de Trabajadores Agrícolas Fronterizos (The Border Farmworkers Center), directed by Carlos Marentes who co-founded the Sin Fronteras (Without Borders) Organizing Project with his wife, Alicia Marentes, more than 30 years ago. While it was built in 1995, it holds a much older history of Mexican agricultural workers, including the men who came through the Bracero Program (1942–64) and the families they left behind.



Rio Vista Farm.

PHOTO BY SEHILA MOTA CASPER

The building was designed to represent a collapsed bridge no longer dividing the two nations. The doorway faces south, representing the migration of workers from south to north. Former *braceros* (“strong arm” laborers) and their families have entrusted thousands of documents to Marentes, who is organizing to demand repayment of funds deducted from the braceros’ wages by the Mexican government.

The Bracero Program began recruiting temporary Mexican laborers during World War II and 6.4 million contracts were issued in its 22-year history for men to work primarily in agriculture, but also in railroads and industry. The first braceros entered the United States through El Paso, and the history of the program—and of the men and their families—is an integral part of the city’s story. Twenty miles east of the Farmworkers Center is Rio Vista Farm. Established as the County Poor Farm in 1915, it not only continued to serve orphaned and poor children until its closure in 1964 but also functioned as a bracero reception center from 1951 to 1964. Surrounded by cotton fields for much of its existence, its buildings remain remarkably well preserved.

What is perhaps even better preserved are the memories of those who worked and passed through the processing center. The [Bracero History Archive](#)—a joint project of UTEP’s Institute of Oral History, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, and Brown University—contains the often surprising oral histories of both men recruited to work in U.S. agriculture and the men and women who worked at the processing center. For example, Manuel Márquez Flores, who was contracted



The recreational hall at Rio Vista Farm is one of two buildings originally erected in the interior courtyard.

PHOTO BY DAVID DORADO ROMO

as a bracero in 1959, remembered that, since there were no beds, the men slept on the floor covered by whatever they had brought with them. He also recalled that the men who were not allowed to work because of health issues were simply told to return to their homes. Since these men had no money, other braceros would pool their funds to give each man \$10 or \$20 toward travel back to his hometown. Their desperation did not prevent these men from being compassionate and generous with their compatriots.⁷

In another oral history, Socorro O. Perez recalled starting work as a clerk at Rio Vista when she was a teenager. Several generations of her family, including her mother and grandmother, lived in El Segundo Barrio in a presidio on Park Street. In 1955 she began typing passports at Rio Vista Farm, starting at harvest time in July and staying until school started again. “Some of these men would come in for the adventure,” she remembered. The clerks were instructed to check the men’s hands—if their hands were smooth, the men were deemed not to be workers. Others had worked so hard that their fingerprints were no longer visible.⁸ In 2001 the El

Paso Community Foundation sponsored a historical marker at Rio Vista Farm called “Granja Rio Vista,” which outlines its history as a poor farm and a bracero processing center.⁹ Significantly, the sign was the first bilingual historical marker in Texas.

As historic preservation evolves toward greater complexity and inclusion, the significance of everyday, “ordinary” tenements and long-abandoned poor houses comes to light. Social and public historians can play a valuable role in recovering such histories and creating spaces in which to revive memories. Telling the story of this nation and the people who lived and worked in its diverse urban and rural areas requires looking with new eyes—ones that can see the long-hidden and sometimes forgotten stories contained within the walls of buildings. FJ

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- 1 Susan West Montgomery, “The Evolving Definition of ‘Historic Preservation’: More Complex, More Inclusive,” *Forum Journal* 30, no. 1 (Fall 2015), pp. 34–38.
- 2 David Dorado Romo, “Not for Public Distribution: Behind the Demolition Plan,” *The Newspaper Tree*, May 1, 2006.
- 3 Eileen Welsome, “Eminent Disaster: A cabal of politicians and profiteers targets an El Paso barrio,” *Texas Observer*, May 4, 2007, available at <http://www.texasobserver.org/2483-eminent-disaster-a-cabal-of-politicians-and-profiteers-targets-an-el-paso-barrio>.
- 4 Like the people historically crossing from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, the concept of a “museo urbano” also migrated. It was first developed by Willivaldo Delgadillo and Fausto Gómez Tuena from la Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez. See Fausto Gómez Tuena, “Los límites de un museo urbano para Ciudad Juárez” in *Relatos de la Memoria. La erosión del centro histórico en la ciudad fronteriza*, Colección Bicentenario, Museo Logos, Editorial Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, 2010, pp. 45–54.
- 5 Olga Beatriz Torres, *Recuerdos de Mi Viaje/Recollections of My Trip*, Juanita Luna-Lawhn, translator, University of New Mexico Press, 1994.
- 6 The word “pachuco” is believed to have come from young men in Los Angeles, California, who described traveling back to their hometown as going “pa’ El Chuco” (slang for El Paso). Pachuco culture emerged in the 1930s and ‘40s, as increasing numbers of Mexican Americans moved to urban areas; Mexican American youth no longer identified with Mexican culture and felt dismissed by U.S. culture. Pachuco culture was expressed through *caló*, a language that combines indigenous words, archaic Spanish, and the language of the Spanish Roma people; dress, especially the zoot suit; and music that brought the big band sound together with the sensibilities of Mexican American youth.
- 7 Interview with Manuel Márquez Flores by Myrna Parra-Mantilla, “Interview no. 977,” Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso, 2003.
- 8 Richard Baquera, “Socorro O. Pérez,” Bracero History Archive, Item 88, available at <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/88>.
- 9 See Texas Historical Commission, *Texas Historic Site Atlas*, available at <http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us>.



TAKEAWAY

Delve into the Bracero History Archive.