

## **Latinos and World War II (1941-1945)**

Roughly 500,000 Latinos served in the U.S. armed forces. Latinos volunteered for, or were drafted into the army, the navy, and the marines. Latinas enlisted in the Women's Army Corps.

Armed forces in World War II at a higher rate than any other group of citizens.

Large numbers of Mexican Americans were serving in the Philippines. Because they spoke Spanish, they could work easily with Spanish-speaking Filipino soldiers. There were 78,000 soldiers and 26,000 civilians.

### **Who Served?**

Some 400,000 were Mexican Americans, while 65,000 were Puerto Ricans. Others traced their ancestry to Cuba, to Central or South America, to Spain or Portugal. Mexico entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1942, many Mexican citizens also fought in the U.S. armed forces.

Latinos served on all major fronts of the war. They fought in North Africa, in Sicily, in Italy, in the D-day invasion of France. Latinos were among the U.S. troops who slogged through the jungles of Burma. They flew on bombing missions over Germany and Japan. The Santa Fe Battalion laid railroad tracks across the North African desert.

### **Medals for Valor**

Sergeant Manuel S. Gonzales, Distinguished Service Cross, Private First Class Guy "Gabby" Gabaldon (gah-bahl-DOHN).

Japanese American family in East Los Angeles and spoke excellent Japanese. He received a Silver Star for talking over 1,000 of the enemy into giving up. Seventeen Mexican Americans earned this award in World War II.

### **World War II Honor Roll**

Admiral Horacio Rivero—

Awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star, and the Navy Commendation Medal for his actions in the Pacific. Some time after the war, he was promoted to four-star Admiral, the first Latino to achieve that rank. After he retired from the navy, Rivero was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Spain.

### **Rush to the War Factories**

Latinos joined the rush to the war factories. Mexican Americans left farms and ranches and small towns.

**Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) – Carlos E. Castañeda**

Mexican-Americans suffered discrimination prior to and during World War II. Like many recent immigrants, they were crowded into run-down urban areas, were exploited as farm workers, suffered high unemployment rates, and met hostility from long-time residents. Most of the population was centered in the Southwest, with a large group in Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles places of entertainment often refused to admit Mexicans. At skating rinks, a sign might read, "Wednesdays reserved for Negroes and Mexicans." Learning such restrictions was part of the education of every Mexican-American child. It hit them hardest during adolescence, when they were already trying to cope with the enormous problems associated with that stage of life.

Most Mexican-Americans were born and grew up in neighborhoods that were almost entirely Mexican. Most of them had not mastered written or spoken English. The press in California often associated Mexican-Americans with sex crimes, knifings, gang violence, marijuana, and a racial inferiority that supposedly accounted for their poverty.

During the early 1940s, some Mexican-Americans adopted a flamboyant style of dress that had originated in Harlem and spread to the West Coast. The boys and men who dressed in this fashion became known as "zooters." The "zoot suit" consisted of a long jacket and trousers tightly pegged at the cuff, fully draped around the knees, and deeply pleated at the waist. Most zooters also wore their hair long, full, greased, and gathered in a ducktail. Many of them belonged to youth gangs, some of which had wholly social purposes, and others of which were organized for delinquent activities.

Many white people lumped all Mexicans into the category of zooter gang members, and white servicemen stationed in and around Los Angeles shared the prejudice. In July 1943 sailors and soldiers home on leave roamed the streets, beating up the zooters, tearing their clothes, and cutting their hair. They demanded revenge for alleged attacks by zooters against servicemen. The Shore Patrol and Military police looked the other way while this violence was taking place. The city police followed the mobs of servicemen, watched the beatings, and then often jailed not the attackers but the victims. This began the so-called "Zoo-Suit Race Riot," which were to last for a week in Los Angeles. After two nights of such activity, one newspaper ran the headline "Zooters Threatened L.A. Police." After another, even worse night, the newspaper blamed the riots on zooter hoodlums.

Throughout the riots the Mexican communities were in turmoil. Scores of Mexican mothers were trying to locate their children and hundreds waited around the police stations and jails trying to get word of missing members of their families. In the streets, boys as young as 12 and 13 years old were being beaten and stripped of their clothes.

In a letter to the President responding to the attacks on the zooters, one man wrote that "zoot-suiters dressed as they did to compensate for a sense of being rejected by society. The wearers are almost invariable the victims of poverty, proscription, and segregation." He added: "It was essential to discipline the offending soldiers and sailors, for otherwise these members of the armed services will believe the wearing of the uniform gives them the license to arbiters of how civilians may dress, speak, act or think."

Later, a citizen's committee revealed the truth about the riot. Although there had been some unlawfulness among a few of the Mexican-American gangs, the servicemen were to blame for starting the aggressive actions. The committee declared the racial prejudice motivated and the servicemen's actions. The citizens' committee demanded punishment of those servicemen guilty of crimes of violence. They also noted the need for public programs to improve conditions in Mexican-American neighborhoods and to combat the racial prejudice that led to events such as those in Los Angeles.

## **Latinos: Contributions**

- 500,000 Latinos served in the Armed Forces
- Latinas enlisted in the Women's Army Corps
- Large number of Mexican Americans serving in the Philippines because they spoke Spanish
- 400,000 Mexican Americans served
- 65,000 Puerto Ricans
- Mexico joins the allies in 1942. This encourages Mexican volunteerism in the Armed services
- Latinos served on all major fronts. They fought in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, D-Day invasion of France and Burma. Many Latinos flew missions over Germany and Japan.
- The Santa Fe Battalion laid railroad tracks across the North African desert which allowed shipment of supplies to allied troops.
- Seventeen Mexican Americans were awarded the Medal of Honor
- While the Mexican-Americans were suffering from discrimination, and battling in the homefront, many of them served in the armed forces abroad. About 400,000 Mexican-Americans served in the military during World War II. Many Mexican-Americans served in Europe while others were shipped to the Pacific.

## **Problems**

Mexican-Americans suffered discrimination prior to and during World War II. Like many recent immigrants, they were crowded into run-down urban areas, were exploited as farm workers, suffered high unemployment rates, and met hostility from long-time residents. Most of the population was centered in the Southwest, with a large group in Los Angeles.

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