



Introduction

Requiem 29

On August 29, 1970, in East Los Angeles, Chicanos staged the largest antiwar demonstration ever organized in the United States by people of Mexican descent. More than twenty thousand marched in a spirited Chicano moratorium against the Vietnam War. Demonstrators came from all over southern California as well as from other parts of the state and from the Southwest. Although predominantly young, the demonstrators included older Mexican Americans. They protested, like Americans across the country, a war that many of them had initially supported. After years of seeing their young men killing and being killed, Chicanos began to question the reasons for the bloodshed and the U.S. role in the conflict. It was an especially relevant issue for Chicanos since they, like African Americans, were being drafted in numbers disproportionate to their percentage of the total population. And once in the military, they were again being killed in numbers disproportionate to their representation in the armed forces.¹ Hundreds of Chicanos were returning in body bags or seriously maimed, both physically and psychologically. For young Chicanos now further engaged at home in a militant social movement for self-determination and self-identity—the Chicano movement—the Vietnam War represented one more example of the ongoing exploitation of Mexicans in the United States, beginning

1. See Ralph Guzmán, “Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam,” *La Raza* (1970), Vol. 1, no. 1, 12–15.

with the U.S. seizure of half of Mexico's territory — virtually the entire Southwest — in the mid-nineteenth century.

And so they marched and protested that fateful day in August, down Brooklyn and Whittier avenues until they converged on Laguna Park. They arrived by the thousands and were greeted with Mexican music and a festive atmosphere on a filtered sunny/smoggy L.A. day. As the first to arrive sat on the grass, watching the rest of the marchers streaming in, they listened to the entertainment and to the speakers. But apprehension soon began to set in among the crowd, and then intermittent police sirens were heard. Rumors began to spread about a disturbance on Whittier Boulevard: police were roughing up and arresting some of the demonstrators. As the crowd turned to look, they saw the ominous arrival of hundreds of helmeted police — Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies — who were assembling at one end of the park, some wearing gas masks. Without warning (the Sheriff's Department would later claim provocation on the part of the demonstrators) they moved on the crowd. Pandemonium broke out as the deputies fired tear gas canisters into the dispersing assembly of men, women, and children. Some of the Chicanos fought back. They pelted the deputies with their own tear gas canisters and whatever else they could find. The deputies charged into the crowd. Flaying nightsticks found their marks. A young Chicana was struck on the back of her head and fell to the ground. Tears from the gas mingled with blood and streamed down the faces of the demonstrators. Moratorium leaflets were dropped and scattered on the streets.²

Out of the park, many Chicanos began to vent their anger and frustration at having their peaceful moratorium violently repressed by the police — another example of the oppression of La Raza. Windows were broken, cars were set on fire, and rocks were thrown. Reinforcement deputies arrived and joined in the beatings. That afternoon, East L.A. became a battleground.³

Ruben Salazar, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and the news director of KMEX, the Spanish-language TV station in Los Angeles, covered the moratorium that day. He and his TV crew witnessed much of the disturbance. Later that afternoon, they retired to the Silver Dollar

2. On the Chicano moratorium, see special issue of *La Raza* (1970), Vol. I, no. 3. Also see Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 3d ed. (New York: Harper-Collins, 1988), 345–350; Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (New York: Bantam, 1974; orig. pub. 1973); and the film documentary *Requiem 29* (1970; produced by Moctesuma Esparza and directed by David García).

3. *Ibid.*

Café on Whittier Boulevard to relax and have a beer. According to cameraman Guillermo Restrepo, Salazar believed that he and his crew were being followed after the breakup of the moratorium.⁴ Shortly after arriving, they heard a police radio outside the café. Through the window they saw armed deputies in riot gear. The deputies ordered everyone outside back into the café, and without warning, a tear gas projectile blasted through the door. Another cannister — a ten-inch missile — smashed into the café. Two others followed. The deputies would later claim that they had been told that an armed individual was inside the café, but no weapon ever turned up. Behind the café, Salazar's colleagues realized that Salazar was still inside. Their attempts to go back to find him were rebuffed by the deputies. Despite his friends' insistence that Salazar remained in the café, the deputies refused to check inside or to allow anyone to enter. When the deputies finally entered several hours later, Salazar's body was found. One of the projectiles, an inquest later determined, had torn through his head.⁵

Raul Ruiz and Joe Razo of *La Raza* magazine, a Chicano movement publication, happened to find themselves across from the Silver Dollar at the time. At the first signs of a disturbance, both began to photograph the actions of the Sheriff's deputies. Their photographs, later published in both *La Raza* and the *Los Angeles Times*, revealed that one of the deputies fired directly into the café. Ruben Salazar was forty-two at the time of his death. He left a wife and three children.⁶

Two other people died at the moratorium, and sixty-one were injured. More than two hundred were arrested, and property damage reached over \$1 million.⁷ When news of Salazar's death reached the Chicano community, its anger and hatred toward the police were mixed with great sorrow over the death of a journalist whom many in the community knew and respected. The inquest into his death was televised and lasted sixteen days. According to Los Angeles County Coroner Thomas T. Noguchi, whose office conducted an autopsy of Salazar's body, Salazar had died almost instantly from a "through-and-through

4. Interview with Danny Villanueva, February 8, 1994, by Mario T. García. Also see Edward J. Escobar, "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968–1971," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993): p. 1503.

5. See *La Raza* (1970), Vol. I, no. 3, and Acuna, *Occupied America*, 345–350.

6. *Ibid.*; Raul Ruiz, "August 29th & the Death of Ruben Salazar," in program for production of "August 29" produced by the Los Angeles Theatre Center Latino Theatre Lab and directed by José Luis Valenzuela in 1990 on the 20th anniversary of Salazar's death.

7. *Ibid.*

projectile wound of the left temple area causing massive injury to the brain.”⁸

The police, including Deputy Thomas Wilson, who fired the missile, were questioned, as were some of the Chicanos who were at the moratorium. One of the key issues was whether Wilson was acting in accordance with proper procedures when he fired the projectiles. This question, however, was never examined because the Sheriff’s Department refused to turn over its training manual, which covered the use of tear gas equipment, and the manual was never subpoenaed by the inquest officer, Norman Pittluck. According to Sheriff Peter Pitchess, “There was absolutely no misconduct on the part of the deputies involved or in the procedures they followed.”⁹

Instead the questioning turned into an indictment of the moratorium. The District Attorney’s office, which was supposed to remain neutral so as to determine the facts of the case, in fact functioned as defense attorneys for the Sheriff’s Department. The moratorium, it was suggested by Pittluck, was an unruly mob determined to do violence. And the Sheriff’s deputies, furthermore, were there only to protect the community and restore law and order. The demonstrators were also portrayed as subversives: “Is that Castro’s man?” Raul Ruiz was asked about a photograph that showed some of the demonstrators holding a picture of Che Guevara. “Che Guevara,” Ruiz responded, “was a great hero to the people of Latin America. He struggled against oppression and injustice.” The Chicanos in the court cheered, and the jury ruled by a 4 to 3 vote that Salazar had met death “at the hands of another.”¹⁰

However, District Attorney Evelle Younger concluded that the facts from the inquest did not justify criminal charges against Deputy Wilson or the Sheriff’s Department. According to Younger, no criminal intent on the part of Wilson or the other Sheriff’s deputies could be determined. Younger further concluded that the split decision by the jury suggested that it would be difficult to convince a trial jury that a crime had been committed. The Department of Justice added insult to injury when it also refused to investigate Salazar’s death after requested to do so by twenty-two California state legislators.¹¹

The case was closed for the police and the investigating officials but

8. See José Angel de la Vera, “1970 Chicano Moratorium and the Death of Ruben Salazar,” in Manuel P. Servin, ed., *An Awakened Minority: Mexican-Americans* (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1974), 274.

9. *Ibid.*, 281.

10. See *Requiem 29*; de la Vera, “Chicano Moratorium.”

11. See de la Vera, “Chicano Moratorium,” 279, 281.

not for Chicanos, who held the police guilty of murder. A well-known Chicano attorney and subsequent celebrity, Oscar Zeta Acosta — aka the “Brown Buffalo” — accused authorities of criminal conspiracy to commit political assassination, another vicious example of police state tactics in America with precedents not confined to the Chicano community.¹² Acosta was twice forcibly ejected from the hearing room for protesting the injustice of the hearing. The ejections in turn provoked scuffles in the courtroom between Chicanos and courtroom deputies.¹³ Danny Villanueva, who was then station manager of KMEX and Salazar’s boss, is perplexed to this day by the lack of prosecution of the officers involved in the Silver Dollar incident. “If there wasn’t a conspiracy,” he concludes, “it is an incredible set of circumstances.”¹⁴

The protests continued, and the Chicano movement had another martyr. Yet, ironically, and despite the many dangerous assignments he undertook throughout his career, Salazar would never have conceived of himself in this way. Salazar was neither a martyr nor a político but a hardworking reporter whose career and work needs to be appreciated beyond his tragic death.

Salazar can be seen as a “border correspondent,” not only because he himself was literally a product of the U.S.–Mexican border or because he covered the U.S.–Mexican border as a reporter at one point in his career but symbolically as well. Salazar’s career was marked by crossing new borders or frontiers. Although there exists a long history of Mexican American journalism in the United States primarily catering to a Mexican American or *mexicano* immigrant population, Salazar was the first journalist of Mexican American background to cross over into mainstream English-language journalism.¹⁵ He was the first Mexican American journalist to work as a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. He was the first Mexican American journalist to become an important foreign correspondent. And he was the first Mexican American journalist to have a column in a major American English-language newspaper.

12. See Acosta, *Cockroach People*. For transcripts of the Salazar inquest, see Oscar Zeta Acosta Collection in the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA) in Special Collections at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Library.

13. See de la Vera, “Chicano Moratorium,” 278.

14. Villanueva interview.

15. Examples of such nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers exist in microfilm. These include *La Prensa* (San Antonio) and *La Opinión* (Los Angeles). Also see my chapter on the Mexican-American journalist Ignacio López, publisher of *El Espectador* in the Pomona Valley of southern California from the 1930s through the 1950s, “Mexican-American Muckraker: Ignacio L. López and *El Espectador*,” in Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 84–112.

In his short career, ended too soon, Salazar crossed a variety of borders, certainly professional ones and undoubtedly personal ones as well. This work is dedicated to examining Salazar as a professional border crosser — a border correspondent.

Who Was Ruben Salazar?

While little is known about Salazar's early life, we do know some general facts. He was born on March 3, 1928, in Ciudad Juárez — “Juaritos,” as the Chicanos on the other side of the border in El Paso called this notorious Mexican border town. When Ruben was eight months old his parents moved across the shallow Rio Grande and settled in El Paso, or “El Chuco,” as it was known by the Chicanos and pachucos of the 1940s and 1950s. There Ruben became a naturalized citizen. His father worked at a downtown jewelry store, where he was in charge of the silver department. This job paid well, and apparently the Salazar family enjoyed a middle-class life in El Paso. After graduating from El Paso High School, Salazar served in the U.S. Army in Germany from 1950 to 1952. In the early fifties, as a result of his own ambition and the encouragement of his parents, Salazar became one of the few Mexican Americans to attend college. He chose Texas Western College, later to become the University of Texas at El Paso, where he majored in journalism and wrote a few pieces for *El Burro*, the campus paper. After graduation, he joined the *El Paso Herald-Post*, the first Mexican American reporter for that paper. The editor, Ed Pooley, had been a longtime champion of Mexican Americans, who, because they lacked education and a political voice (even though they represented the majority in El Paso), had few employment opportunities and most often lived in poverty.¹⁶

Cub Reporter

Salazar's work during his apprenticeship at the *El Paso Herald-Post* is obscured by the lack of byline articles carrying his name. Nevertheless, according to Earl Shorris, who began his career at the *Herald-Post* while Salazar was there, Pooley thought Salazar could do no wrong and considered him to be his best reporter.¹⁷ What can be identified as Salazar's

16. See Ruben Salazar résumé in Ruben Salazar File with the *Los Angeles Times*. Interview with Earl Shorris, February 28, 1994, by Mario T. García. On Pooley and the *El Paso Herald-Post*, see García, *Mexican Americans*, 113–141.

17. Shorris interview.

own work confirms his talent as a reporter and provides some fascinating reading, especially a short series of investigative pieces. Assigned to the police and Juárez beats and aware of the poverty and accompanying alienation of many Chicanos in this border city, Salazar volunteered to investigate the Chicano underworld. For one story, “25 Hours in Jail — I Lived in a Chamber of Horrors” (May 9, 1955), Salazar had himself booked on a phony drunk charge in order to experience conditions in the city jail. He was locked in Tank 6 along with several other Chicanos. Salazar reported on the filthy and repulsive conditions of the jail, where the prisoners had easy access to drugs. Under the influence of drugs and alcohol and almost totally unsupervised, the inmates committed violent acts against each other. After one night, Salazar had had enough. “I left the jail,” he wrote, “knowing how it feels to live in a hophead Chamber of Horrors.”

Shorris recalls that Arturo Islas, who was on the detective staff of the El Paso Police Department, remarked after the story broke that he had seen Salazar in jail but had assumed that Salazar had indeed been arrested for being drunk and therefore had done nothing to secure his release. Shorris further notes that the jail story quickly became the journalistic coup of the decade in El Paso. Before that story the local newspapers had carried very little investigative reporting. According to Shorris, Salazar’s story and similar pieces helped change the nature of journalism in El Paso.¹⁸

In another investigative story (August 17, 1955), on La Nacha, the dope queen of the border, Salazar posed as a drug user. He hired a drug addict known as “Hypo” for \$15 to demonstrate a purchase from La Nacha. Accompanying Hypo, Salazar visited La Nacha’s home in the barrio and revealed to his readers how easy and open the trade in drugs, including heroin, was in El Paso.

It was just as easy for poor down-and-outs to purchase homemade liquor from one of the several speakeasies in South El Paso, the main barrio. On this story (July 3, 1956), Salazar met Chenchá, the queen of the speakeasies, who was famous for her ten-cent shot of the potentially lethal “alky.” “It rasped my throat like sandpaper,” Salazar wrote. While these early Salazar pieces contain some stereotyping of Chicanos, they are also poignant expressions of the plight of the inhabitants of this Chicano underworld. They achieve an intense social realism, a kind of muckraking social reformism, and they reveal Salazar’s willingness to

18. *Ibid.*

investigate a story even under the most difficult conditions. According to Shorris, these stories made Salazar into something of a hero in El Paso. "Ruben was the best reporter El Paso had ever seen," Shorris concludes.¹⁹

Like many of the other reporters at the *Herald-Post*, Salazar, according to Shorris, possessed the ambition and the dream of eventually moving on to California, specifically, to the Los Angeles papers.²⁰ Consequently, sometime in 1956 or 1957, Salazar moved to California, where he first worked for the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* and a short time later moved on to the *San Francisco News*. After moving to southern California in the late 1950s, Salazar found a position with the *Los Angeles Herald-Express*. In 1959, Salazar got his big break and joined the *Los Angeles Times*. It was with the *Times* that Salazar would mature as a journalist.²¹

The *Los Angeles Times* and Ruben Salazar

While Salazar's death covering the Chicano moratorium led to his appropriation as a martyr by the movement, in fact Salazar was not in any sense a movement follower, much less a leader. He reported the movement and articulated some of its aspirations and frustrations, but he was not a movement activist. Above all Salazar was a reporter, a journalist. He can be understood better not through the Chicano movement or ethnic politics per se but in particular through his association with the *Los Angeles Times* and the dramatic changes that characterized the *Times* during the 1960s.

Since its origins in 1881 as the *Los Angeles Daily Times*, founded by Harrison Gray Otis, the *Los Angeles Times* had been a mediocre, highly partisan Republican newspaper. During its early years, it was noted for its antilabor views. It helped to organize the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, whose goal was to keep Los Angeles a nonunion city. When Otis died in 1917, his son-in-law, Harry Chandler, along with his wife, assumed control of the *Times*. Chandler had worked as both circulation manager and business manager. This first member of what was to become the Chandler dynasty did not make significant changes at the *Times*, which remained a right-wing Republican organ.²² One critic dismissed the *Times* as "reactionary, self-serving and provincial."²³

19. Ibid. 20. Ibid. 21. Salazar résumé.

22. See Marshall Berges, *The Life and Times of Los Angeles: A Newspaper, a Family, and a City* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), 3–34.

23. Jack R. Hart, *The Information Empire: The Rise of the Los Angeles Times and the Times Mirror Corporation* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 2.

When Harry Chandler died in 1944, his son, Norman, became publisher. It was Norman Chandler who in the late 1950s began to recognize that the *Times* needed to change and to improve. One historian of the *Times* describes the malaise at the newspaper in these words:

Measured against the best newspapers of the East and Midwest, it [the *Los Angeles Times*] was arguably a narrow, parochial, self-serving paper, boosting its friends and denouncing its enemies. Narrow in viewpoint and erratic in coverage, its reporting and editing had a distinct smalltown quality.²⁴

One of Chandler's first improvements was to appoint Nick Williams managing editor in 1958. Williams also wished to make the *Times* more than a local institution. Chandler instructed Williams to "push." "I want some investigative reporting," he told Williams. "I want reporters to go out there and dig. And above all I want the paper to be fair."²⁵

One of Williams's charges was to reconstruct the *Times* into a regional newspaper. "A metropolitan paper could survive," Jack R. Hart observes, "only with a regional identity that followed the readers to the suburbs."²⁶ To achieve this broader coverage, Williams diminished the role of "beat" coverage, what he called "protective coverage," which involved assigning individual reporters to cover city hall, the police department, the courts, and so on. Television, it was argued, could better cover fast-breaking stories. Instead, Williams assigned reporters to cover stories of greater regional importance, which included Salazar's reports on the U.S.–Mexico border and on the Bracero program in California.²⁷

Yet the most significant decision to change the *Times* came when Norman Chandler decided to retire in 1960 and to appoint his son, Otis, who was only thirty-two, publisher. Building on his own sense of competition, developed as a skilled athlete in college, Otis Chandler, Jr., understood that in order for the *Times* to become competitive into the 1960s, it had to recognize significant new developments. First, Los Angeles was no longer just a western town but a huge metropolis in the most populous state in the nation. This demographic shift had created what some observers referred to as a "continental tilt" to the West, in terms of both population and political and cultural influence. Second, Otis recognized that in the age of television, newspapers had to change

24. Berges, *Life and Times*, 73–74.

25. *Ibid.*, 98.

26. Hart, *Information Empire*, 124.

27. *Ibid.*, 124–125.

to compete. Television could more easily report highlights of the news as the *Times* had been doing. “Perceiving the broad outlines of this threat,” Berges notes, “Otis reasoned that newspapers of the future would have to provide much more, giving their readers interpretive and analytical stories, plus practical service-type, consumer-oriented features that would prove useful in coping with the increasingly complex challenge of daily life.”²⁸ Otis recognized also that by improving the *Times*, he would be tapping and retaining a ready market of better-educated and more affluent men and women, which in turn would attract advertisers. As Hart says of this strategy, “The whole *Times* revamping was guided by a decision to keep the paper’s circulation concentrated in the households of relatively wealthy college grads, nearly 90 percent of whom already subscribed.”²⁹

A shrewd businessman, Otis Chandler first moved to secure the morning newspaper market. He understood that afternoon newspapers would find it more difficult to compete with the evening TV news. He canceled the *Mirror*, the afternoon suburban newspaper owned by the *Times*, and struck a deal with the rival Hearst paper, the *Herald-Express*, in which the Hearsts agreed to close their morning paper, the *Examiner*, in return for control of the afternoon market. What the Hearsts did not realize was that Chandler had outmaneuvered them to gain control over what would become the more lucrative morning newspaper market.³⁰

Bill Thomas, who began his career with the *Mirror* and would become city editor at the *Times* under Otis Chandler, recalls that the cancellation of the *Mirror* allowed the *Times* to merge some of the better reporters and editors of the *Mirror* with the *Times* staff. This merger gave the *Times* the opportunity to reorganize and revitalize its reporting. Besides getting the best people from the *Mirror*, the *Times* got rid of its worst people. “I always felt that the emergence of the *Times* as a serious newspaper on the national scene got its start from two things,” Thomas notes. “One was Otis who as a publisher was determined he didn’t want to be known as the publisher of one of the worst ten newspapers in the United States. And the other was the merger of the *Times* and the *Mirror*.”³¹

Having eliminated his morning competition, Chandler set out to attract new and more educated and affluent readers and advertisers by

28. Berges, *Life and Times*, 101.

29. Hart, *Information Empire*, 144.

30. Berges, *Life and Times*, 99.

31. Interview with Bill Thomas, October 1, 1993, by Mario T. García.

redefining the *Times*. Instead of being a provincial, limited, Republican newspaper, it was to be a first-class, nonpartisan national and international newspaper. Chandler told Williams, "I want it [the *Times*] to be the number-one newspaper in America."³²

Chandler instructed Williams to recruit and develop top-flight editors, writers, correspondents, critics, and columnists. He did this by paying salaries and benefits comparable to the largest Eastern-based newspapers and news magazines. Reporters were now recruited not only for their general reporting abilities and for their writing but also for their expertise in particular areas. The *Times* began to emphasize specialized and interpretive reporting in such areas as education and science. In addition, the *Times* expanded its news bureau in Washington, D.C., and its foreign bureaus. Bob Gibson, who was recruited from *Business Week* and became the *Times*'s foreign editor in 1964, observes that the *Times* increased its foreign bureaus from three to fifteen by 1966. Moreover, from 1958 to 1965, the news and editorial budgets of the paper doubled.³³

Within the span of a few years, the *Times*, through Otis Chandler's commitment to change, had been almost completely transformed. No longer a joke in the world of print journalism, the *Times* had achieved Chandler's goal of prominence based on high-quality reporting and writing. In 1963, *Time* magazine for the first time included the *Los Angeles Times* in its list of the nation's ten best newspapers. And two years later, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "The [L.A.] *Times* has been converted from a newspaper of dubious reputation to one of the more respected and complete papers in the country. . . . Otis has also beefed up news coverage, both in quality and quantity, and, largely, under his aegis, the paper has shucked its traditional image as a spokesman for arch-conservatism."³⁴

Bill Thomas recalls some of these changes when he became city editor in the mid-1960s. First was the inclusion of new talent, seasoned reporters and editors from other news publications or young, well-educated college graduates who in the 1960s began to see journalism as an exciting profession. This infusion of college graduates into the ranks of working journalists, Thomas notes, was unprecedented. Besides their brightness and energy, they brought new perspectives. Thomas also witnessed and encouraged more aggressiveness in covering the news. Finally, he re-

32. Berges, *Life and Times*, 108.

33. Ibid., 101; Hart, *Information Empire*, 146, 149, 269; interview with Bob Gibson, September 17, 1993, by Mario T. García.

34. Berges, *Life and Times*, 112.

members that the *Times* was profoundly influenced in its news coverage by the significant social changes and tensions of the 1960s.³⁵

Among the social changes was a growing awareness by the *Times* of the complex and diversified population of Los Angeles. Thomas claims that even before the Watts riots in 1965, in which African Americans violently reacted to years of poverty and police harassment, the *Times* was beginning to cover the African American community, but clearly the riots forced the *Times* to become more aware of this community. Thomas recalls his attempt to recruit African American journalists, which proved to be no easy task as their numbers were few at that time.³⁶ In like manner, while the *Times* had paid some attention to the even larger Mexican American community, it was not until the 1968 school “blow-outs,” when thousands of Chicano students in East Los Angeles walked out of their high schools and junior high schools to protest inferior education, that the *Times* began to do more reporting on the conditions affecting the Chicano community.³⁷

All of these significant changes in the *Times* during the 1960s created a space—a border area—for the development of Ruben Salazar as a journalist. His arrival at the *Times* in 1959 coincided with far-reaching changes at the *Times*. Salazar’s rise at the newspaper is explained not only by his considerable talent and the political events of the 1960s but also, and perhaps more important, by the transformations inaugurated by Otis Chandler. Salazar was a product of these changes and he, in turn, helped to change the *Times*.

Politics, the Border, and Braceros, 1959–1965

Ironically, Salazar seems not to have been very keen on being assigned to cover Mexican American issues when he first began at the *Times*. City editor Bill Thomas recalls that Salazar’s concern was that he would be typed only as a “Mexican” reporter. Thomas believes that Salazar’s reaction also involved a certain snobbishness. Nevertheless, as a good reporter, Salazar accepted his assignments and in time became quite committed to the Mexican American community.³⁸

During his first period of reporting for the *Times*, between 1959 and 1965, Salazar focused on the concerns of, and protests by, Mexican

35. Thomas interview.

36. *Ibid.*

37. On the “blowouts,” see Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (London: Verso Press, 1989), 64–68.

38. Thomas interview.

Americans in the pre-Chicano movement years. Although these protests were not framed in the militant terms of the later *movimiento*, they revealed the origins of both the problems and the issues to be taken up by the Chicano generation. In writing about these more moderate efforts at social reform by Mexican Americans in the early 1960s, Salazar reflected and influenced the moderate objectives of Mexican American leaders and their faith that the system could work for them. The Chicano generation, by contrast, despaired of the system, for the most part rejected it, and instead looked to alternative political strategies to obtain justice.³⁹

Salazar's reporting in the early sixties reveals a growing sense of frustration among Mexican American leaders. Having worked to elect John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 through their organization and participation in the Viva Kennedy Clubs, Mexican Americans expected important concessions, patronage, and programs designed specifically for them. Instead they received only token appointments and meaningless efforts on the part of the Kennedy administration.⁴⁰ By 1963, before Kennedy's assassination, Mexican American leaders in Los Angeles were openly criticizing the administration for its poor record concerning Mexican Americans. Salazar reported these complaints in his coverage of a meeting between Mexican American leaders and Vice President Lyndon Johnson during the summer of 1963 (July 29, 1963). The grievances brought to Johnson's attention were varied. They included Mexican American opposition to the bracero program, which since World War II had brought thousands of Mexican contract laborers to work in the fields of California and the Southwest. The program resulted in the dislocation and alienation of many domestic Mexican American farmworkers, while the braceros met with hardship and exploitation.⁴¹

Other issues taken up with Johnson were the continued segregation of Mexican Americans in low-wage jobs, the lack of educational mobility, extremely low median family incomes, the insensitivity of the schools to the language and cultural backgrounds of Mexican American students, and the pressing problems of newly arrived immigrants from Mexico. The inability to obtain relief and attention from the Kennedy

39. See García, *Mexican Americans*, and Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power*.

40. See Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994), 193–231.

41. On the bracero program, see Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte and Santa Barbara: McNally & Loftin, 1964).

administration disillusioned many Mexican American leaders with the Democratic party. As Salazar noted in “Papacitos [bosses] Era Seen on Way Out” (June 13, 1964), new aggressive Mexican American leadership, characterized by groups such as the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), was less willing to tolerate Mexican American Democratic “papacitos” who only worked to ensure Mexican American support for the Democratic party. Instead, MAPA and other groups moved toward a more independent political position.

Besides writing on other aspects of Mexican American politics of the early 1960s in Los Angeles, such as urban problems and growing tensions between Mexican Americans and African Americans over the division of the meager allotments of federal programs, Salazar devoted considerable attention to the issue of education and its relationship to Mexican Americans. Education, of course, had always been central to Mexican American political and community concerns; it was viewed as the key vehicle for social and economic mobility.⁴² However, Mexican Americans had historically been denied access to greater educational opportunities. Teachers, school administrators, employers, and others believed education was wasted on Mexican American children because of their “cultural deficiencies” and “intellectual underdevelopment.” They saw the primary value of Mexican Americans as cheap manual labor. As a result, segregated and inferior “Mexican schools” came to characterize the public school system’s relationship with the Mexican American population.⁴³

Earlier efforts to deal with these and other problems led Mexican American leaders to struggle on two fronts: to improve the conditions of the segregated schools by obtaining more resources for them and to litigate actively for desegregation of the schools. Some of these struggles created improvements and legal breakthroughs (for example, the Westminster case in Orange County in 1946) that threw the weight of federal law behind the Mexican American contention that segregation on the basis of race and culture was unconstitutional.⁴⁴ By the early 1960s, as Salazar’s reports indicate, Mexican American leaders were becoming convinced that educational reforms had to take into account the lan-

42. See García, *Mexican Americans*, and Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Quest for Educational Equality in Texas, 1918–1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

43. See Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880–1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 110–126, and Gilbert G. González, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation* (Philadelphia: Balch Institute, 1990).

44. See García, *Mexican Americans*, 53–59.

guage and cultural backgrounds of Mexican American children. The inability of the schools to address these issues effectively and positively led to the high dropout or “kick-out” rates of Mexican Americans.

Salazar’s articles on the educational concerns of Mexican Americans not only brought attention to this issue but, by his positioning of arguments and quotes, favored a Mexican American perspective. In a piece on dropouts (October 22, 1962), Salazar quoted the educational scholar George R. Borrell, who astutely observed that what was lacking in the earlier debates on the issue of education and Mexican Americans was the Mexican American perspective. “What we need,” Salazar quoted Borrell, “is the inclusion of that basic element that has been conspicuously absent in the discussions, the Mexican American himself.” And in writing about the plight of Pablo Mendez, a dropout, Salazar noted, “Though he looks like a Mexican, Pablo is not. He’s an American, but doesn’t think of himself as one, and in many respects is not looked upon as one by non-Mexican-Americans.”

In covering important conferences in the Southwest during the early 1960s on the educational needs of Mexican Americans, Salazar reinforced the key theme of educational alienation. This involved frustration over the efforts by the schools to force acculturation on Mexican American children without any sensitivity to Mexican culture and the Spanish language as spoken by Mexican Americans. The answer, as Salazar reported, was effective bilingual and bicultural education, which would include a curriculum that focused on the cultural heritage of Mexican Americans. On September 16, 1963 (Mexican Independence Day), Salazar reported on a Mexican American ad hoc education committee that attacked the Los Angeles Board of Education for ignoring Mexican American problems. “We recognize that an educational philosophy based primarily on the principle of assimilation has proven historically inadequate,” the committee asserted. Instead, it suggested an acculturating process that is “basically the acceptance of the plurality of culture as a functional principle. This entails the implementation of both cultures (Mexican and Anglo) to the greatest advantage possible in creating a personality who will find dignity in both.”

Specifically, the committee called for the teaching of Spanish at all levels of education, the introduction of Mexican and Latin American literature into the curriculum, and the hiring of bilingual teachers, counselors, and administrators, as well as other reforms that would assist in supporting the retention of Mexican American children in the schools. The failure of the Los Angeles school system, and other school systems

in the Southwest, to implement these recommendations led to intense confrontation later in the decade and to the polarization of the issues — as occurred, for example, in the 1968 blowouts in East Los Angeles.

In early 1963, Salazar brought attention to some of the conditions affecting Mexican Americans in Los Angeles in an award-winning six-part series, “Spanish-speaking Angelenos.” In this series Salazar focused on the unique history and identity of Mexican Americans. Anticipating the later Chicano movement’s search for historical and cultural roots, Salazar recognized that Mexican Americans could not be understood as simply another immigrant ethnic group. Instead, Mexican American identity and culture were rooted in the earlier, pre-U.S. history of California. “Los Angeles has one of the largest Spanish-speaking urban populations in the Western Hemisphere,” Salazar wrote (February 24, 1963).

Most are “Mexicans,” but historians tell us this does not accurately describe these people because in many respects they are “indigenous” to Southern California and the Southwest. Though they also help make up what generally is known as California’s “Spanish heritage,” Spain is not their “mother country.” They are so highly heterogeneous they can not be adequately understood by studying the cultures of Spain or Mexico. This [the series] is an attempt to trace where they came from, what they are and where they are going.

It was this history that was responsible for the unique biculturalism of Mexican Americans. As would later Chicano activists and intellectuals, Salazar insisted that Mexican American culture was guaranteed its existence by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, which had ended the U.S.–Mexican War (1846–1848) and had led to the U.S. annexation of the Southwest. American society, according to Salazar, had to understand and appreciate this biculturalism and its value for Mexican Americans. It was the failure to do so, especially by the schools, that had led to the continued marginalization of Mexican Americans. At the same time, Salazar stressed that Mexican Americans themselves had to appreciate their own bicultural backgrounds. Faced with hostility and discrimination, Mexican Americans too often turned their backs on their own cultural legacy. This was wrong, Salazar contended, and until Mexican Americans could be proud of their own identity, little social progress could be achieved.

Other issues that Salazar addressed in this series were Mexican American residential segregation in Los Angeles, what Salazar referred to as the creation of a “Serape Belt,” and the lack of political unity among