

Mexican American trailblazers recognized by Austin History Center

32 stories reveal community advancement, personal triumph

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In the 1950s, musician extraordinaire Manuel "Cowboy" Donley created a signature sound and started a craze.

Donley, a singer, songwriter and arranger who could play anything, took classic Mexican musical stylings and instruments and lit a fire under them, adding rhythm sections, electric guitars and bouncy, blaring horns. "I had discovered something different," says Donley, now 83 and known by many as "the Godfather of Tejano Music."

When she was a girl, Gloria Moreno dreamed of becoming a teacher. But Moreno put off her dream so she could raise her children, and it wasn't until she was 39 that she would graduate from the University of Texas, propelling a 24-year-career with the Austin school district during the tumultuous time of desegregation. As a fifth-grade teacher, she designed a test-taking skills improvement program for minority students that was later implemented districtwide.

"I was just doing what I was compelled to do from my heart and from my training," says Moreno, 79.

Today Donley, Moreno and 30 others will be honored for their contributions as part of a groundbreaking Austin History Center exhibit, "Mexican American Firsts: Trailblazers of Austin and Travis County." The exhibit celebrates the lives of Mexican Americans who were the first to make advancements within their communities in education, politics, business, social and public services, health and medicine, communication, entertainment, science and technology, and sports.

It's the first time a history center exhibit has specifically put a spotlight on the local Mexican American community, said Gloria Espitia, a neighborhood liaison with the center who conceived of the idea as a way to educate and promote the importance of preserving the untold stories and memories of local Mexican Americans.

"I think it's time that this community gets to know that this history is as long as it is, and about the many obstacles that (Mexican Americans) encountered," Espitia said. Early Mexican American residents suffered overt discrimination that was common in Texas well into the 20th century, and in interviews recorded for the history center — including some conducted by students at Martin Middle School — many of the trailblazers talked openly about overcoming prejudice, Espitia said.

"This is an attempt to complete the story of the Mexican American community to the extent we can with this small but admirable effort," said Emilio Zamora, a history professor at the University of Texas who was an adviser on the project. The center will offer other programs related to the exhibit, including a traveling version of the display in September and a genealogy workshop in November.

Today, Mexican Americans account for a dominant share — 83 percent according to 2008 census estimates — of the booming Hispanic community in Austin, which comprises about 37 percent of the Austin population, according to estimates by City of Austin demographer Ryan Robinson. But the

Mexican American experience in Austin and Central Texas dates to the early 1800s, according to Zamora, an expert on Mexican American history.

In 1900 Mexican Americans comprised just 2 percent of Austin's population, according to the book "Austin: An Illustrated History" by David Humphrey. "By 1930 Austinites of Mexican descent formed 10 percent of the inhabitants and numbered 5,000," Humphrey wrote.

Once predominantly farm workers, Mexican Americans in Austin and Central Texas over time became skilled workers, business owners and professionals, Zamora said.

A committee of five people with educational, cultural and historical areas of expertise selected the trailblazers from a total of 60 nominations. The list of honorees includes nine women and 23 men, some unheralded, such as Arturo Alemán, a Mexican immigrant who came to Austin in 1911 and achieved his American dream, opening his own grocery store on Medina Street, and Emma Galindo, who in the 1960s was instrumental in initiating the first bilingual education program for the Austin school district. Others are more well-known — like John Treviño, the first Hispanic elected to the Austin City Council, and Gus Garcia, the first Hispanic to be elected mayor.

Garcia said he, Treviño and another trailblazer, Richard Moya, the first Mexican American elected to the Travis County Commissioners Court, were "young Turks" who sought to break free from a longstanding system in which a handful of Hispanic leaders and businessmen had access to Anglo city leaders.

"We wanted to make it more democratic," Garcia said. "None of us thought about doing this so we could be recognized. We did it because there was a need in the (Mexican American) community."

Supporters hope that showcasing the achievements and contributions of the trailblazers also will help right negative images presented in early Austin chronicles. For example, in an article in the March 1913 Bulletin of the University of Texas, William B. Hamilton wrote: "Between Congress Avenue on the east and Rio Grande Street on the west, Fourth Street on the north and the river on the south is a section which may be called the Mexican District. Bordering this section on the south is the main city dumping ground. The Mexicans have all the filthy habits described already, but you must add to them the worse filth of the dump."

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