

"Humble" Beginnings: Baytown's de Zavala "Mexican School"

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The Baytown Mexican School opened in 1928, and during its forty years of existence, it served its purpose. It was a school where Spanish-speaking children could learn English, and it was a safe and comfortable place where children of meager circumstances were with others like them. As time passed, the school became more of a holding bin for Mexican-American English-speaking students, and the segregated schooling created stagnation and a fear of being different. The school was a constant reminder of society's view that one was inferior because of the color of one's skin, and Baytown had been built on that theory.

The birth of Baytown arrived with Ross S. Sterling, the founder of Humble Oil and Refining Company, who had come to the Goose Creek area in search of a building site for a new refinery. The Board of Directors chose Goose Creek field and decided to name the area "Baytown" due to the many small bodies of water in the vicinity. With the founding of Humble in 1917 came the onslaught of Mexican workers, and by 1920 the labor force of the refinery was mostly comprised of Mexicans. Segregation was not openly questioned and regularly accepted by the Mexican community, who were thankful to be employed.

At the refinery, Ku Klux Klan membership was advised, and "Klan material was on display in company offices. Sterling apparently was one of the early initiates who gave employees a rationale for following suit."¹ Not only were the Mexicans residentially segregated, they also had separate recreation facilities and were not allowed to participate with the white establishment on holidays such as Humble Day and Labor Day. They were, however, allowed to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. Along with these indignities, the Mexicans suffered from lower wages, because it was clearly understood that they were to be no more than laborers. The Mexican laborers were denied from partaking in the Labor Day celebration at Humble—a holiday honoring all working people.

The children of these laborers had no school that they could attend in order

to receive the education they deserved and needed. They could not attend other area elementary schools due to racial and language barriers. El Salon, the Humble recreation facility designated for the Mexicans, was where the children were sent for schooling, but a recreation hall was not an environment conducive to learning. "The older girls were nothing more than babysitters for the younger children—they weren't learning."² The community desperately needed a school, and it was vitally important that these Mexican-American children learn English.

The School Board of the Goose Creek Independent School District met on August 25, 1927, and a "motion was made and carried . . . to take the [sic] proposition up with Board of Directors of the Humble Oil and Refining Company and ask that the company sell . . . a plot of

Ms. Elizabeth Burrus and her 1961 first grade class at Baytown's de Zavala Elementary School.

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land" which would become the future site of the Mexican School.³ On October 14, 1927, the School Board secured a location "for the Mexican Ward School building."⁴ That statement, in itself, casts a light on the intentions of GCISD. The school was to be separate; a division, exclusively Mexican. It is representative of the feelings harbored, at that time period, toward the growing Spanish-speaking community who built the Humble refinery from the ground up and which in turn created Baytown. After the proposition with Humble Oil and before securing a location, "a motion was therefore made, seconded, and carried that GCISD be zoned as followed for the year of 1927-28; and that all children residing in certain named zones shall be required to attend school located in said zone, with the proviso, however, that the school board, in its discretion and for good causes shown, permit the transfer of any pupil from one zone to another."⁵ This must have been how the School board explained (though it was probably never questioned) why small children had to walk long distances, in good and bad weather. Most walked along dangerous railroad tracks for a short-cut when there were other schools closer by. Granted, some of the children needed to learn English, but as the years passed, the English-speaking Mexican-American children were being sent there as well.

On November 21, 1927, "a motion was made and carried that . . . the proposed Mexican school be named the deZavala School," yet in School Board minutes the school is only referred to as the "de Zavalla [sic] School" on contracts and bonds for construction and plumbing.⁶ The school was not publicly and officially given the name of Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary School until ten years

later. Therefore, in September 1928 the Baytown Mexican School, a three-room school house, opened its doors to grades one through seven, with a total of one-hundred twenty-four students. The first original teachers were: Ms. Bertie Walker, first grade; Ms. Celeste Dashiell, second, third and fourth grades; and Ms. Jessie Pumphrey, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades.

The children's education facility had gone from a recreation hall to a school which was built with no lights, bell system, telephones, gas or maintenance services. "A hand bell was used, alarm clocks, coal stoves; and the children and teachers took care of the cleaning of the building and grounds."⁷ W. B. Dumas, a Spanish-speaking School Board trustee "worked with teachers the first week and helped them get started," and the Mexican School's "first year was 'rough going' for teachers, children and parents."⁸ The problems with the Baytown Mexican School were conceivable due to lack of lighting for seeing and reading and gas for proper heating, but teachers and students had a bigger battle to wage, and that was the demoralizing exclusion from celebrating Humble Day on May 9, 1928. It had been declared a school holiday for all with "the exception of the Colored School and the Baytown Mexican School. Signed W. B. Dumas."⁹ The aforementioned Spanish-speaking School Board Trustee had slighted the Mexican community he was supposed to have helped.

GCISD School Board Minutes on July 3, 1928, discuss a salary schedule to be adopted for janitorial services for the district's schools. The Baytown Mexican School was allotted \$15 per month for their janitor's pay. Archie Zamora was hired in August 1929 for \$20 a month,

when the salary for all other GCISD school janitors ranged from \$300 to \$100 per month. The School Board had also adopted a salary scale for teacher's pay. The salaries for Ms. Dashiell and Ms. Walker ranked almost even with all other teachers in GCISD (\$130), but Ms. Pumphrey's was a mere \$125 per month.¹⁰ Eventually the school was given the facilities it needed to teach its students. Two years after the school's opening, two more classrooms were added along with two more teachers. Mr. Zamora was the full-time custodian, and the school received an electric clock, lights, and gas. In 1937, Ms. Jessie Pumphrey was officially relieved of her teaching duties to become full-time principal. A strong Parent-Teacher Association's first official act was naming the school Lorenzo de Zavala, after the first vice-president of the Republic of Texas and a positive role model for Mexican-American students. In 1942, the school received a music room that was to serve as facility for music, lunchroom, parties, and meetings. In 1951, a cafeteria was added which meant the children were finally given a proper place to eat their meals.

The facts that coincide with the dates can be found in the Baytown Sterling Municipal Library, but what cannot be found there are the previously undocumented statements from former students who remember all too well the miserable

conditions of their school. "We had no library; each room had a bookshelf of tattered books—mostly fiction—nothing challenging."¹¹ "We had one restroom facility for the girls and the plumbing was often backed up, so we had to use the boy's restroom."¹² "Our school books we used were old and out-dated—they were the books the other schools had thrown out."¹³

A comparison with Ashbel Smith Elementary School, built in 1927, one year before the Baytown Mexican School, reveals the two schools were not built according to the same standards. In 1952, Ashbel Smith Elementary School had an "auditorium-cafeteria, two teacher's lounges, a library, bookrooms, and several restrooms. The principal had a full-time secretary, and the cafeteria had a staff of eight employees. The school enjoyed the use of visual aid equipment, a piano, radios, record players, fans, water coolers, library books, physical education materials, and an intercommunications system."¹⁴ Ashbel Smith Elementary enjoyed these luxuries in 1952, while de Zavala Elementary was finally given a cafeteria in 1951. When former students were asked if they enjoyed the use of visual aid equipment, fans, record players, and other things mentioned, they replied with a snort and a laugh. It was just easier to laugh.

The Mexican-American children were not treated equally or fairly, but

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many of the former students have fond memories of their teachers and Miss Jessie, as they called her, their school principal. de Zavala was one of the first schools to use a pilot project called the "Little School of 400." This program was designed to teach Spanish-speaking preschool children a text of four hundred basic English words created by Elizabeth Burrus, a teacher at deZavala. The program prepared the children to better learn English. Ms. Burrus' method relied on simplicity—"every speaking situation may be handled by two simple directions: "Come and Tell me." "A teacher must want to teach these children to be a success..."—and Ms. Burrus did.¹⁵ "She and her text were featured in the *Saturday Evening Post* of August 5, 1967. In speaking with Ms. Burrus, it is apparent how much she enjoyed working with her Mexican-American students, and she felt genuine affection for the deZavala "family." She believed in her students' ability and intelligence and firmly stated that "my children were just as prepared and/or better than other students to enter junior high school."¹⁶

The de Zavala Alumni Committee honored Ms. Jessie Lee Pumphrey with a plaque in January 1992. "Ms. Pumphrey was a one-of-a-kind educator. She was principal of de Zavala Elementary for 36 years. Miss Jessie dedicated her life to educating the Mexican-American children of Baytown. She loved her students. She believed in them. She had high expectations for them."¹⁷ Eugenia Rios remembers her for her kindnesses and things she did for her students outside of the classroom. When Miss Rios threw a childhood fit, embarrassed by her homemade Easter basket and thus destroying it, Miss Jessie bought her a Coke and surprised Miss Rios with a

brand new beautiful Easter basket. "She just knew."¹⁸

Antonio Banuelos also deserves recognition for his work with the children of de Zavala Elementary. Wonderful things took place at the school when he began to teach music there in 1938. He was an accomplished musician who performed with the Houston Symphony in the early 40s. He was known as "El Professor" by the Mexican community (although in several Baytown *Sun* articles in 1981 and 1982 he is given the title of Dr. Antonio Banuelos though no documentation can be found as to whether or not he had an earned doctorate). He diligently worked so that all students, regardless of ability to pay, had instruments so they could participate in his music program. He created "La Tipica" an all-girl band that played Mexican Folkloric music which often performed at Humble and gained attention outside of Texas. He was strongly opposed to segregation and his daughter, Kuka Juarez, remembers her father telling her of his wishes to have his music program integrated—children of all races playing music together. His dream was never realized at deZavala Elementary.

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* supposedly brought an end to segregation in the nation's public schools, but it took thirteen years before deZavala, a school where only Mexican-American children attended, was to be closed. The teachers and Miss Jessie did what they could to make de Zavala a wonderful school and largely succeeded; yet, hundreds of students segregated into a separate school created a feeling of lasting inferiority. Evidence used against segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* demonstrated how segregation damaged children and was, therefore, a violation



Professor Antonio Banuelos and his all-girl Mexican-Folkloric band, "La Tipica."

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of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. "The children of the South did not reject the feelings of inferiority [and] . . . sort of accepted it as part of the reality of their lives."¹⁹

The parents also exhibited feelings of inferiority and were indifferent because the School Board was insensitive. The parents that didn't speak English allowed their children to be sent there because other parents had resigned their children to the same fate—it had become convenient. Kuka Juarez likened the situation to baby chicks who crowd their mother for fear of being lost. After graduating from de Zavala, "most students self-imposed segregation. The Mexicans stuck with the Mexicans and the whites with the whites."²⁰ Mexican students missed out on opportunities to get to know and communicate better with their white counterparts and vice-versa.

ENDNOTES

¹Margaret Swett Henson, *The History of Baytown* (Baytown: Bay Area Heritage Society, 1986), 102.

²Eugenia Rios, personal interview, Baytown, Texas, 2 February 1993.

³Minutes, School Board, Goose Creek Independent School District, 25 August 1927. (Hereafter cited as Minutes, GCISD.)

⁴*Ibid.*, 14 October 1927.

⁵*Ibid.*, 12 September 1927.

⁶*Ibid.*, 21 November 1927.

⁷"Historical and Biographical Baytown, Texas," *Baytown City Directory*, 1952, 172.

⁸*Ibid.*, 171-172.

⁹Minutes, GCISD, 23 April 1928.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 3 July 1928.

¹¹Razo, Augustin, personal interview, Baytown, Texas, 17 March 1993.

¹²Acosta interview.

¹³de Hoyas, Ruben, personal interview, Baytown, Texas, 17 April 1993.

¹⁴"Historical and Biographical Baytown," 172.

¹⁵Burrus, Elizabeth, *Beginner's Speaking Vocabulary*, 4.

¹⁶Burrus, Elizabeth, personal interview, Baytown, Texas, 27 February 1993.

¹⁷Plaque, de Zavala Reunion Committee, January 1992.

¹⁸Rios interview.

¹⁹Kluger, Richard, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 444-447.

²⁰de Hoyas interview.

de Hoyas, Ruben, personal interview, 17 April 1993.

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Burrus, Elizabeth, personal interview, 27 February 1993.