



# THE FACES OF POST 41

South Phoenix Latinos fight for their country  
abroad, battle for their civil rights at home

**Part II: The 1940s**



By Charles H. Sanderson

# The Faces of Post 41: 1940s

## ‘Air raid Pearl Harbor. This is not drill.’

**N**ine months passed between David Perez’s enlistment and Pearl Harbor’s fateful day. During that time, the world began its spiral into World War II. On Sept. 1, 1939, Poland was overrun by 1.8 million German troops. Two days later Great Britain, France, Australia and New Zealand would declare war against Germany.

Life did not change drastically for Phoenix or much of the U.S. over the next two years. But the U.S. government wasn’t about to relax. As the possibility of war neared, American troops were shuffled around the globe and trained to their specific tasks.

In 1940, two national guard units from New Mexico were mobilized: the 200<sup>th</sup> and the 515<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery (anti-aircraft). Many of these men were Latinos from New Mexico, Arizona and Texas – often selected, in part, because they spoke Spanish – one of two official languages in the country where they would be stationed, the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Their new home was to be Clark Field, 65 miles from the capital of Manila.

On Sept. 16, 1940, the Arizona National Guard mobilized its famous troops, now named the 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. In February 1941, after training at Fort Sill, Okla., the 158<sup>th</sup> was sent to Camp Barkley, Texas, and then on to Louisiana.<sup>2</sup>

Most Mexican Americans felt a deeply patriotic calling. Young Ray Martinez was determined to enlist in the armed forces, but nobody would accept him. Army, Marines, Air Force; they all turned him down. Their reason was a metal plate in his left arm. At 15, Ray had been struck by a car while delivering newspapers. But something was about to happen that would change recruiters’ minds.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of the holiday season, in the dark morning hours on six Japanese aircraft carriers, planes were taking off for the Hawaiian island of Oahu and into American infamy. It was December 7th, 1941.

Hours later, Joe Torres was shining his shoes when suddenly people began yelling in the streets. He looked up to see their faces as they called out, “Pearl Harbor’s been bombed!”

Sgt. David Perez was downtown at a movie in Texas when a voice interrupted to call out, “All military personnel report to your units. Pearl Harbor has been bombed.”

Steve Zozaya was sick, laid up in the hospital. “I was having a good

time ... no training. Not getting up in the morning. So when we heard, when the announcement came that Pearl Harbor had been bombed; one day that hospital was full of troops. But the next day that hospital was empty. Everybody wanted out.”<sup>3</sup>

Pete Dimas was in his parents’ car with friends when he turned the radio on and heard the announcement. After the news report, he looked at the others, “We’re going. We have to get it and we have to go.”<sup>4</sup>

Four days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. and so began this country’s participation in World War II. Within six months, Ray took a test for enlistment in the Navy. He had finally been accepted into the armed forces.

## Bataan and Corregidor

**N**ine hours after Pearl Harbor was attacked, Clark Field was hit. Personnel knew about the surprise attack in Hawaii 30 minutes after it had begun, but still were caught off guard. The 515<sup>th</sup> and 200<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery regiments were never told of an impending attack on their own base. They had spent three peaceful months enjoying the theater that had been set up, taking day trips to Manila and fighting boredom.

That morning, planes took off from Clark Field and headed north to spot any Japanese bombers that might be headed their way. When nothing was seen, they returned to base and headed for the mess hall to fill their

1940s-era map illustrating the layout of the early battle in the Philippines.

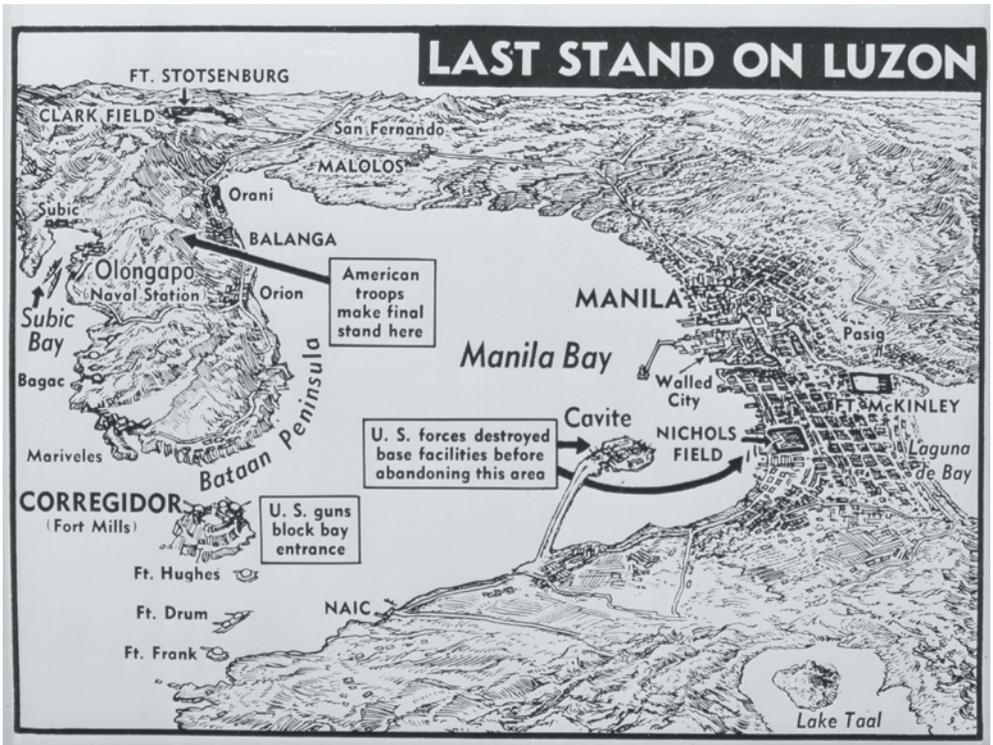


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empty stomachs. As the pilots sat down to eat, the sky filled with Japanese planes flying too high to hit with the base guns. As the bombs fell, smaller planes swooped in to strafe what remained. The pilots' mess hall tent fell quiet, with Epimenio Rubi of Winslow among the first American casualties in the Philippines.

Two more fields were attacked throughout the Philippines – Iba Field in Zambales and Nichols Field near Manila. Troops fell back into the walled city of Manila as it came under siege. Then the headquarters of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet at Cavite was struck. Two days later, Japan began to move ground troops in on the overwhelmed U.S. and Philippine troops.

For two weeks, the American forces struggled to maintain a foothold in the Philippines. Realizing the insanity of staying put, Gen. Douglas MacArthur pulled back his troops into the Bataan Peninsula, west of Manila. From there, they moved to a fortified island, Corregidor. It was an embattled retreat. The Japanese pushed through three separate lines of defense as U.S. and Philippine forces struggled to hold ground. On March 12, Gen. MacArthur, his family and staff boarded four PT boats and sped to Mindanao Island, then to Australia. On April 3 the Japanese rained down artillery on the defending forces. It took them three days to punch through the struggling defenses.

The troops fell back again – starving, surrounded, trapped. They could last only so long.

## Father Albert Braun

On the morning of April 9, 1942, U.S. and Filipino forces on the Bataan peninsula surrendered. Corregidor Island was the only stronghold left. That day, a thin voice called out from a radio broadcast, the “Voice of Freedom,” deep in Corregidor’s Malinta Tunnel:

*“Bataan has fallen. The Philippine-American troops on this war-ravaged and bloodstained peninsula have laid down their arms. With heads bloody but unbowed, they have yielded to the superior force and numbers of the enemy.*

*“The world will long remember the epic struggle that Filipino and American soldiers put up in the jungle fastness and along the rugged coast of Bataan. They have stood up uncomplaining under the constant and grueling fire of the enemy for more than three months. Besieged on land and blockaded by sea, cut off from all sources of help in the Philippines and in America, the intrepid fighters have done all that human endurance could bear.”*

Corregidor was all the soldiers had left. The island was two miles from shore, yet honeycombed with tunnels and armed with mortar batteries high enough to shoot beyond its lower hills. There on its rocks stood Fathers Albert Braun and Herman Baumann. It was close enough to watch the mainland and see captured soldiers filing ghostlike through the trees under the watchful guns of their Japanese captors.

The prisoners would walk for 12 days, over 85 miles of jungle and



PHOTO COURTESY FRANK BARRIOS

Albert Braun as a young chaplain during World War I. Despite wounds received on the battlefield, Braun remained through the day and night, ministering to the wounded men and giving last rites to the dead. For his efforts, he would receive the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star.

underbrush, dying as they went. The Bataan Death March had begun. A large number of the troops killed or captured were Mexican Americans, intensifying the fervor of U.S. Latinos during the war.<sup>5</sup>

As the prisoners marched on, Braun and Baumann waited with their fellow troops on Corregidor. They stayed in the open with their soldiers even as the island siege began. They only descended into the caves when needed for rites at a makeshift hospital in the bowels of the mountain.

Each night, from antennas cobbled together after the bombs quieted, the “Voice of Freedom” radio broadcast out of Corregidor’s Malinta Tunnel then signed off with the defiant words, “Corregidor still stands!”

Two hundred feet below Malinta Hill at the island’s center, they felt nervously safe. The soldiers fought on through a daily barrage of artillery from the Japanese. But as they suffered under the bombs, Gen. Jonathan Wainwright realized he could not let the enemy reach Malinta Tunnel in battle – there were too many wounded and defenseless men there. Over the radio, he offered to surrender the island.

A month after Bataan had been overrun, Corregidor fell on May 7.

The soldiers were in a painful state. A month pinned in the tunnels had forced all of life to take place there. The stench of excrement and rotting bodies overpowered everyone. Their Japanese captors refused permission to bury the dead, who had begun to decompose. Others tried, but it was Braun who found some way to secure the opportunity to perform rites. The bodies were necessarily burned, and the bones buried.

He celebrated Mass with the makeshift hospital’s wounded soldiers at the mouth of the tunnel, though he was not permitted access to the soldiers at the bottom-side garage area. Instead, he would slip through Japanese troops as a litter-bearer and give what services he could without detection.

In July, Braun found himself and others shipped to Bilibid prison in Manila, then to Cabanatuan prison in central Luzon, and numerous other prisons. In each, the priest would scrape together survival with determination and stolen scraps of food, while ministering to fellow prisoners.

## Western tears

As the Asian continent boiled with warfare, other Arizona Latinos fought in some of Europe’s most heart-breaking battles. Back home, still more of Arizona’s eager men and women set aside their lives and poured into the recruiting offices and shipped off to fight on numerous fronts.

Luis Córdova’s son, Valdemar put life on hold to join the military at 18, before he had even finished high school. He was two classes shy of graduating from Phoenix Union High School and left behind a hard-earned

reputation as a basketball star and put on hold feelings he had for a young girl, Gloria.

With his training complete, the young man shipped out to England in late 1943. He joined the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force at Edge of Ipswich, 60 miles outside of London. Early the following year, he had successfully completed 14 missions in a B-17 bomber over targets in Germany.

The 15<sup>th</sup> trip would be different.

Second Lt. Córdova's plane droned over Germany as anti-aircraft shells began to fly. It was Jan. 29, 1944, when enemy fire tore through their B-17 above Frankfurt, Germany. The crew bailed out of the plummeting B-17, and parachuted to safety. But Córdova was captured.

The Stalag Luft 1 Berth Prisoner of War camp would become home for the next year and a half. He was listed as a POW by the U.S. War Dept. in April 1944, along with fellow Arizonan and flyboy Sgt. Frank G. Mabante of the 525<sup>th</sup>.

Córdova would receive the Purple Heart.<sup>6</sup>

## The beaches of Normandy

**F**or the first three years, the war against Germany was fought from the eastern side. Then a plan was made for the Allies to squeeze Germany from the other side. It would start with an assault onto the beaches in southern France, Operation Neptune. Never before or since has so large an invasion taken place in one day. Approximately 140,000 troops were to step onto Normandy's beaches on Tuesday morning, June 6, 1944.

It was the night after a full moon as the ships moved in. The tide dropped and the men approached. At 6:30 a.m., as the sky began to brighten, the first ground troops made their move onto the beach at Omaha. The invasion of Normandy had begun.

The events of the day were so much more than Pvt. 1st Class Philip Fierros could have anticipated.

Hunched over on a landing cruiser with the other men, he waited. "I don't remember what time it was. But It was pretty rough. ... Well, we uh ... was a bunch of us, was a full load in one of these ... *como se llamen?* ... Yeah, those flat jobs. We were all packed in one of those things with all your pack and everything and your duffle bag. And I thought well, as soon as we get off we're here to camp or something.

"No. From then on it was go, go."

Troops in an LCPV landing craft approaching "Omaha" Beach on "D-Day", June 6, 1944



PHOTO ARMY SIGNAL CORPS COLLECTION IN U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

More than 10,000 Allied soldiers would die in that invasion. Another 4,000 to 9,000 German soldiers would lose their lives. Young Fierros would survive that fateful day and battle his way across France and into Germany. After the war, he would receive a Silver Service Star and two Purple Hearts for his contribution.<sup>7</sup>

Two days after the initial landing at Normandy, another Phoenician from the barrios would step into the destruction of Normandy's beaches.

Miguel Gomez had met his high school sweetheart, Dora Mendoza, at a street dance in the park. She was a fast-pitch softball player who caught his fancy. They married soon after high school. By May 1943, Miguel was working as a stock boy at a clothing store in Phoenix and Dora was expecting their first child.

Then the government called for young Miguel. Before being sent off to boot camp, he paid \$20 to change his name from Miguel to Mike. Perhaps he was worried about the discrimination and ridicule heaped on Latino soldiers during World War I. But in the end, with bullets in the air and men dying, it ultimately didn't matter where a soldier came from. What did matter was risking one's life for a fellow soldier.

His two brothers would also be drafted.

"The United States drafted 18- and 19-year-olds because younger men do not feel fear to the depth that men in their mid-20's do," Gomez recalled in an interview. "Younger men feel invincible, and the seriousness of the situation does not completely register with the young soldiers."<sup>8</sup>

The soldiers were young, but fear was still there. It could be seen in the cigarettes they constantly held to their lips and the prayers that were spoken without privacy. Gomez remembers these moments clearly as he approached a beach in Normandy.

On June 8, 1944, the D-Day invasion was in its third day. Hundreds of ships approached in the latest wave by the 837<sup>th</sup> Ordinance Combat Depot Company of Gen. Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army. Mike Gomez waited on one ship, his 19-year old body braced for the coming battle. He was praying aloud.<sup>9</sup>

The men descended ropes and stepped into landing craft that would cross the shallow churning waters to the shore. A thousand or more floating bodies tossed in the waves as the men drew closer.

Gomez remembered later, "We ran like hell when we got to the beaches. It's a matter of survival, but you always have a little fear in you. It's their life or yours." Then, a surreal moment touched him in the whirlwind.

As mortars and bullets showered the beachheads, Gomez jumped into a crater left by an exploding shell. There with him was another soldier from a different unit – Frank Calles. They had lived nearby in the barrios back home and became friends. Imagine the surprise of meeting a friend from the barrio on the battlefield 5,000 miles from home. Yet here they were, with a moment to reflect on the chance encounter, so many miles and an ocean away from home. But only for a moment.

They each burst out into the open and dashed for the next place of cover. Frank Calles disappeared into the madness. Both would survive, but years would pass before they reunited again, back in Phoenix.

For the moment, there was still a war to fight.

## Desperate days

**B**y June 1942, Pete G. Dimas had enlisted, just as he had promised the day he heard on a car radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. After training, he was assigned to the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry and sent to a peaceful front line near Luxembourg, in the thick, forested hills of the Ardennes Mountains.

Dimas would be made Army cook, thanks to experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps as a “dog robber,” serving meals to officers, cleaning their quarters and making their beds. Now, standing over the stark Army meals, he daydreamed about his mother’s cooking back home. Sopapillas, chili with carne sauce. The most delicious beans.

As the December air froze Europe in 1944, Hitler’s army was still reeling from the surprise attack on the beaches of Normandy, France. He and his generals began planning a secret offensive to split the Allied front line in Ardennes and circle back on the weakened forces. It was to be Germany’s last bold success of the war.

The predawn silence of Dec. 16 shattered as German artillery pummeled the front lines. The Battle of the Bulge had begun. Two days later, Pete Dimas’ division, near the town of Bastogne, struggled to hold its line.

Dimas, one of Post 41’s first members, remembers the battle well in a striking 2004 interview. The true pain of what he saw comes through; his eyes showing none of his years, yet all of the sorrow as the viewer is pulled back to that day, told not by an Allied soldier, but by a man whose friends died at his side.

“... We looked beyond. I forgot what direction. And Bastogne was on fire. You could see the flame. The red fire, you know, the reflection.

“They’d shoot artillery for a little while. And they stopped altogether. Then the German rifleman was coming, and they were making a lot of noise. They do that. Make you feel worse. They were hollering, and they were coming and they start shooting machine guns. And we start seeing them and we start shooting back, you know?

“We were holed there for about ... I don’t know what it was, 20 minutes or a half hour. But it seems to me it was a long time. And the men were getting wounded, getting shot. And we stayed there until the captain gave the order. ‘Men we can’t ... we are losing too many men here. We just have to pull out. We have to, you know ... retreat.’”

In the interview Sgt. Dimas’ voice goes soft, lost in the memory.

“And we had to retreat. And I could see the men getting, you know ... wounded pretty *badly*. And it seems like when you’re in that condition to me ...”

Dimas is overcome by the memories. He looks down, his jaw line shakes as if he can still feel that cold winter. “That the men were getting ...” he pauses again, the words painful on his lips. Clearing his throat he continues, “... shot, getting killed. Hurt me.”

Dimas’ hand gestures in frustration with the emotion. “We were so close together, you know?” He looks down with the innocent, powerless

In 1969, Kurt Vonnegut would write a story drawing on his experiences in the same POW camp that Sgt. Pete Dimas saw. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has become known as an American classic anti-war, science fiction novel.

sorrow of a young man. The moment is over and one is left with somber respect for the soldier's world.

Three days after the battle began, despite constant maneuvering and robbed of energy by skirmishes in the snow drifts and bogs of the Ardennes, Sgt. Dimas and the few men left of his unit were captured. Dimas was one of the last to surrender.

The German soldiers permitted Dimas and another soldier to build a stretcher out of branches and an overcoat to carry one wounded friend up to a nearby road where the Red Cross would pick him up. The two men turned away from the road, hands on their heads, and rejoined their captured troops.

During the night the prisoners marched through a city that had been decimated. They sang "God Bless America" as they passed the ruins. "We kept on singing and singing and singing and singing. And walking and walking, and we just wanted to let the Germans know that we weren't licked yet," Dimas said.<sup>10</sup>

When the Battle of the Bulge was lost, more than 7,000 Americans became prisoners in World War II's largest mass surrender of U.S. troops in the European Theater.

For three months, Dimas was listed as missing in action. Then, in early 1945, a letter found its way to his family.

Dimas had been taken to Prison Camp Stalag 4B Muhlberg Sachsen 51-13, near the Czechoslovakian border. It was an enormous prison filled with emaciated soldiers made worse by over-crowding. It was the same internment camp that author Kurt Vonnegut Jr. would write about in his 1969 novel "Slaughterhouse-Five."

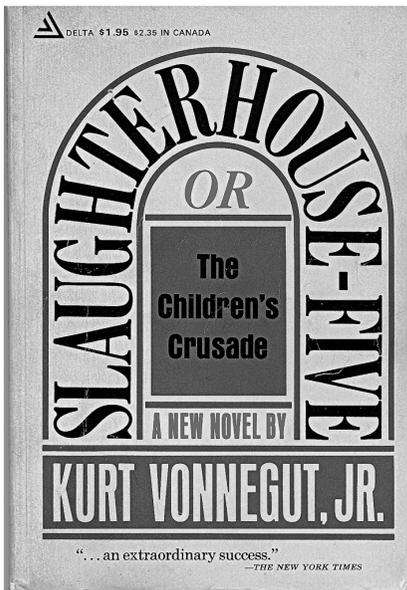
In Dimas' own words, he wrote home, "So far I am getting enough to eat and I have a place to sleep. As soon as the war is over with Germany, I will come home. So let's make the best of it and hope it won't be long."

The reality may not have been so simple. He would remember in later interviews that he "saw quite a few people that died while I was a prisoner."<sup>11</sup> He recalled one prisoner being shot in the head simply because he had become too sick to move.

But Dimas survived. The threat of starvation was held back with a loaf of bread for every seven men and the occasional cup of fetid soup, alive with worms – forcing the men to pick them out before eating.

Then his luck changed. Four months after his capture, the Russians were advancing on the scattering Germans at the Elbe River. As the Nazi troops fled, U.S. soldiers came across the river in a canoe to rescue the prisoners of war. Dimas was among those rescued in April, 1945, and flown to France on a C-47 cargo plane.

"You could hardly believe it when you were liberated. I was jumping up and down even though I felt sick."<sup>12</sup>



## Along a wooded road

**S**ilvestre Santana Herrera's story may be the best known of Latino heroes in World War II. It was another example of will and putting your unit before yourself. And it made Herrera one of the most celebrated Hispanic soldiers in Arizona.

Rain soaked into their clothes as the soldiers filed along a quiet forest road in northern France. Silvestre Herrera and his platoon were advancing along the dirt road as it cut through the dark trees of a forest near the village of Mertzwiller, close to the German border. It was the morning of March 15, 1945. Allied forces had taken the Rhine. They were on the verge of victory against Germany. Pfc. Herrera was an acting squad leader/automatic rifleman. Company E 142nd Infantry of the 36th (Texas) Infantry Division was the lead element as it moved into German-held territory.

His best friend was a sergeant he had nicknamed "Squirrelly." Herrera would later honor his friend by giving his grandson the same nickname. But today, he was alone in his thoughts, scouting ahead 400 yards from his companions, his M1 rifle close and ready.

What was he doing here? Months before, he was with his expectant wife and three children. Murky events surround the days after he received his draft notice in 1944. The generally accepted story is as follows:

He had grown up in El Paso under the watchful eyes of Librado and Gertrudis Santana. With them, he worked in the crop fields. In 1927, he traveled to Phoenix with Librado to work at local farms and at a dairy. Along the way he would meet Ramona Hidalgo Guerrero. They married in 1939 and three children soon followed: Mary, Elva and Silvestre Jr. A fourth baby was waiting to enter the world when Silvestre received his draft notice. He was 27.<sup>13</sup>

What he didn't know is that Librado and Gertrudis were not his parents. His father was really an uncle who had brought 1-year-old Silvestre to El Paso when his parents died in the 1918 influenza pandemic in Silvestre's hometown of Ciudad Camargo, Chihuahua, Mexico. The discovery was made when Librado told him, exclaiming, "You don't have to go, you're not American."

But Silvestre couldn't see sending somebody else to fight in his place. He may have been Mexican, but he had lived in the U.S. most of his life. His family was there. His friends were there.

And so it was. Herrera reported for boot camp at Fort McClellan, Ala. He was assigned to the Texas Army National Guard. Soon he was shipping out with the first American unit to land in Europe during World War II.

That seemed like such a long time ago. Herrera now had the present on which to focus. He and the other soldiers continued along that road.

Then the quiet air was pierced.

Gunfire blasted from the trees. Two German machine gun posts sent some of the platoon diving for cover. Others dropped to the dirt road and crouched along the edge. In the commotion, Herrera was unable to tell where orders were coming from. He shouted and sprang up to move forward.

Spotting the barrel flash of a machine gun in the trees, he leveled his

Silvestre Herrera in 1946. After the war, Herrera would make a living as a leather worker and silversmith.

own weapon to fire back as he ran forward. He dropped three German soldiers with his bullets. When he was close enough, he hurled a hand grenade at the emplacement. Then another.

Before anybody had time to think, eight Germans had surrendered.

Decades later, Herrera would remember, “Those Germans, they were really nice people. I remember they all had bad trench foot when we captured them.”<sup>14</sup>

“I remember I kept thinking to myself that I had to do everything I could to give my company a chance to advance, and so, that’s what I did. There was too much at stake.”

As his unit took control of its prisoners, Herrera crawled ahead, bullets ripping through the air from a second machine gun. Herrera continued to fire rounds in hopes of keeping the enemy pinned so his platoon could advance. As the platoon crept forward, it was stopped by increased machine gun fire and a minefield.

Some of the men threw rocks into the field, attempting to trigger the mines and make passage safe. Again, Herrera pushed ahead of the others with his own technique. “I knew there was a minefield. I had a two-by-four and was pushing it ahead of me,” he explained in a later interview. Then impatience got the best of him.

He tossed aside the board, and “that’s when I made my mistake.”<sup>15</sup>

Silvestre stepped on a landmine. When he came back down to the ground, he hit yet another.

He looked down to see his boots were gone, and his pant legs on fire. In those two moments, he had lost both feet and part of one leg just below the knee.

He reached for his rifle.

Herrera somehow clutched at his M-1 Garand rifle and lifted it to the trees. He applied a bandage to his leg and dragged his body to the rocks.

He braced himself and began firing at the enemy. He hit at least one of the Germans and forced the others to stop shooting and take cover.

Under Herrera’s covering fire, his platoon moved in and killed the German machine gun crew. The platoon found a path through the minefield and located a bleeding and injured Herrera. They rushed him back to an aid station. Later, Herrera was sent to an Army hospital in Utah.<sup>16</sup>

The next day, the Americans began a massive artillery barrage and the 142<sup>nd</sup> forded the Zintzel River at the small village of Mertzwiller. In one week, they had stepped on German soil. On May 7, Germany surrendered.

Finally back in the states, Herrera was still coming to terms with his new life. He looked up from a slice of watermelon to see a face in the shade of the Chinaberry tree. A telegram had been delivered to him. He was needed in Washington. The president was going to honor him.

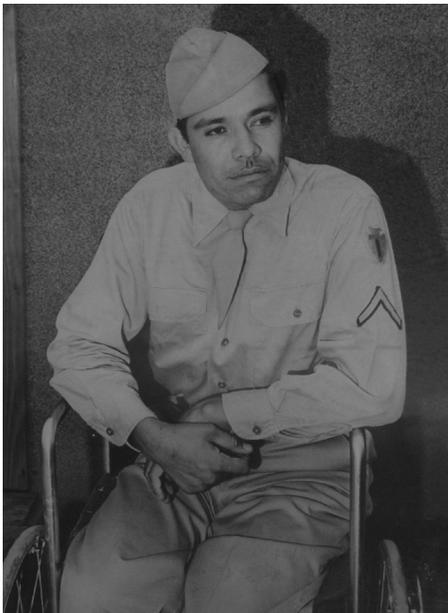


PHOTO COURTESY OF AMERICAN LEGION POST 41

He was decorated by President Truman on the afternoon of Aug. 23, 1945, at the White House. That day, bending down to drape the medal around Herrera's neck, the president spoke quietly, "I would rather be awarded the Medal of Honor than be president of the United States."<sup>17</sup>

Herrera flashed that infectious smile as those words made him even prouder.

During the ceremony, twenty seven soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor, more than any other time before in U.S. history. In March 1946, Herrera was discharged from the Army as a sergeant and a hero.

The official record reads as follows:

*He advanced with the platoon along a wooded road until stopped by heavy enemy machinegun fire. As the rest of the unit took cover, he made a 1-man frontal assault on a strongpoint and captured 8 enemy soldiers. When the platoon resumed its advance and was subjected to fire from a 2<sup>nd</sup> emplacement beyond an extensive minefield, Pvt. 1<sup>st</sup> class Herrera again moved forward disregarding the danger of exploding mines, to attack the position. He stepped on a mine and had both feet severed but, despite intense pain and unchecked blood loss, he pinned down the enemy with accurate rifle fire while a friendly squad captured the enemy gun skirting the minefield and rushing in from the flank. The magnificent courage, extraordinary heroism, and willing self-sacrifice displayed by Pvt. Herrera resulted in the capture of 2 enemy strongpoints and the taking of 8 prisoners.*

## No greater fighting team

**A**fter the attack on Pearl Harbor pulled the U.S. into war, more Hispanics than ever would enlist in the armed forces. The decimation on Bataan Peninsula had touched many of their lives, with the largely Latino troops of the 200<sup>th</sup> and 515<sup>th</sup> trapped by the Japanese.

But earlier in September 1940, Col. J. Prugh Herndon of Tucson had already formed a group of men to train for jungle warfare. He chose the 158<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Arizona. They were mobilized in anticipation of hostilities and sent to Fort Sill, Okla., and then in February of 1941 to Camp Barkeley, Texas. As hostilities erupted, the men were shipped yet again. This time to Panama.

The Panama Canal was a key location and of interest to both the Japanese and the Germans. Six days after Christmas, the 158<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment shipped out to train for a year and two months in the Central American jungles and to provide a military presence in what was seen as a risk zone – the vital thread between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Here they earned a new nickname. David Perez chuckles as he recalls the way it came about.

*"They decided to have a bet between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 158<sup>th</sup>: race across the isthmus – which is about 50 miles from one coast to the other ... but with a heck of a mountain range you have to go through. So, being that we were strangers to*

*the jungle, they thought we'd be whipped. But we fooled 'em. Hehe! The 158th got there before the 5th. And along the way there, I guess they picked the Bushmasters from the snake that is very common there in the jungle. It's a very aggressive snake. And it's more or less a night feeder, and it doesn't give you much time to pray, before you're gone."<sup>8</sup>*

A patch was designed. It was blue and white with a snake coiled around a machete.

But while the Bushmasters were winning bets by hacking through a jungle in Central America, the embattled men on Bataan Peninsula continued to struggle for survival. They could not last. As he retreated, Gen. MacArthur turned to declare, "I came out of Bataan, and I shall return." MacArthur needed men capable of helping him keep his promise. He needed the Bushmasters.

In early 1943, the Bushmasters stepped out of the Central American jungles and onto converted passenger ocean liners bound for Brisbane, Australia. For two years, they had trained as an efficient unit with the capacity as independent soldiers capable of commando-style jungle combat. But it would be months before they engaged in battle.

At the end of December 1943, it was finally decided to test the skills of the 158<sup>th</sup> on embattled Arawe Peninsula. Two months later, in February 1944, they finally succeeded in that first grueling battle. Back home, Gov. Sidney P. Osborn honored them by proclaiming Jan. 28 Bushmasters Day.

Rested up, the 158<sup>th</sup> would battle for the airfield on Wakde Island off the north coast of Dutch New Guinea. Forty lives would be lost over three days. Advancing forward to the Sarmi region of mainland New Guinea would cost them another 400 soldiers. They lost 45 men on the Batangas Peninsula, March 12, 1945. They invaded the Bicol Peninsula of southern Luzon and the city of Legaspi on the same day – April 1, 1944. They stood victorious again, but suffered 200 casualties in the battle for Luzon.

The rice fields of Luzon, where the 158<sup>th</sup> Bushmasters would make a push toward Manila.



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Steve Zozaya, a member of Post 41, was one of those who despite injuries survived the battle. Not fond of reliving war stories, Zozaya did share the experience briefly in a 2004 interview.

“We were in the front line where we’d been battling. There were other troops that got ahead of us. Anyway, there was a wounded man. Two of them in fact, in front of us. And we could hear him. ‘Help! Help!’ And, so I just jumped up and I ran. And I got to maybe about 30 yards. I got up and the man was there. The other man was already gone.

“So I crawled. I got him to get up on my back. I got up and I was running back with him when the mortars hit. And they just knocked me down, hit my legs.”

Zozaya would survive his experience, receiving the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart for his efforts. He would return home to become one of Phoenix’s most prominent Latinos.<sup>19</sup>

The 158th continued its island-hopping advance toward the Philippines, eating away at Japanese territory with unlauded efficiency. Sorsogon. Camalig. Mt. Isarog. Yokohama. MacArthur checked off names on the map as they advanced. One of their greatest challenges would be Noemfoor in July 1944.

With three airbases and a well-used staging area for Japanese troop deployment, the island of Noemfoor was a strategic point that needed to be eliminated for Allied success. On July 2, MacArthur chose the 158<sup>th</sup> to spearhead what he called Operation Cyclone. Joined by the British Royal Air Force and five other U.S. fighter and bombardment groups, Operation Cyclone totaled more than 8,000 men.

The morning of July 2 the men of the 158<sup>th</sup> were flown to the beaches of Noemfoor near Kamiri airfield by Task Force 77.

Though the three airfields were captured within five days, the rogue Japanese mounted a guerilla campaign that dragged through Aug. 31, 1944.

By August of the following year, the 158<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team was being called on to spearhead one last hard attack – an invasion into Japan’s own territories. Back home, families in the barrio read the newspapers nervously as their men pushed on.



The original 1940s patch for the Bushmasters 158th Infantry Regiment.

## On the home front

**I**n 1943, Los Angeles was a hotbed of news around the nation as young Mexican Americans and U.S. sailors clashed. Known as the Zoot Suit Riots, the incident was the explosion of emotions that had grown from a build-up of violence and racial tensions in the Chavez Ravine community.

Back in Phoenix, people waited and worried. They had experienced similar tension. A riot among soldiers in Phoenix on Feb. 27, 1942, led to the death of several Black soldiers and raised the community’s wariness around minorities. Hispanic families did their best to avoid confrontations.

As 1943 came to a close and Christmas approached, tragic news

continued to roll in. The Lara household was heartbroken when word came of its son's death. Ray Lara had died in action in Africa. Two days before, his young wife had given birth to a son.<sup>20</sup>

To help their soldiers and perhaps keep themselves distracted from the heartbreak, the South Phoenix barrios showed support for the troops in numerous ways.

In February 1944, Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church opened its doors for the annual nine-day pre-Lenten novena prayer services. The church's chronicle recorded the event asking for the safety of the soldiers from their parish. Each night, the church was packed with parishioners, depositing their prayer items. Soon, hundreds of soldiers' photographs surrounded the church's holy crucifix. Three hundred and fifty candles were lit, day and night.

On the final night, more than 900 parishioners came to receive communion.<sup>21</sup>

The following year, in March 1945, the Battle of the Bulge was a tragedy recent in their memories. The Russians were unveiling the atrocities at Auschwitz. And the war continued to come home in heartbreaking moments such as the POW letter from Pete Dimas and Silvestre Herrera's valiant but tragic loss. But these weren't the ultimate sacrifice.

The death toll of Arizona soldiers early that year was 22. Pfc. Hilario Padilla and Sgt. Hilario M. Gutierrez of Phoenix were listed among the dead.

Immaculate Heart again received the community en masse for novena. Another 700 photographs were placed in the church and there were nearly 200 more candles than the year before.<sup>22</sup>

But the barrio did not just pray for its sons and daughters in the war. Families, organizations, entire barrios were involved in the war effort from the beginning. As early as Jan. 30, 1942, Los Leñadores del Mundo (Woodsmen of the World) held a "Diamond Jubilee" dance and festival to honor President Roosevelt and to show Mexican support for the war effort.<sup>23</sup>

In July, there was a nationwide crisis of the oil supply as the new plastics industry struggled to keep up with the needed production of war materials. The Standard Oil Company challenged several communities to gather as much plastic as they could in a competition. In Arizona, the kids of the Marcos De Niza housing project scoured their streets for anything made of the precious material. They managed to gather 2,200 pounds – more than any other youth group in Phoenix.<sup>24</sup>

As the winter of 1942 approached, Phoenix began to feel another shortage. Its huge cotton industry was again at risk, and it was needed for war production of parachutes, blimps and gliders. With some local Mexican American organizations helping – such as La Alianza Hispano Americana and Los Leñadores – the Victory Labor Volunteer Group organized a three-week harvest. As many as 5,000 Mexican American workers stepped in to pick 35,000 pounds of cotton before the crop was lost. White and brown skin worked side by side in the fields to finish the job with patriotism flush in their faces.<sup>25</sup>

Realizing the passion and potential of the Hispanic community, a February 1943 meeting was held by leaders of Spanish-speaking churches in Phoenix. They decided to take active parts in pushing the Hispanic community to continue its involvement in such local war efforts. Local Spanish-language newspapers *El*

*Mensajero* and *El Sol* helped get the word out.<sup>26</sup>

The following year those efforts paid off. An event was organized with mariachis, folk dancers, food and celebration. At its core, this “Noche Mexicana” was a bond drive. Kicking off this effort, the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church’s pastor stepped forward as the first to purchase a bond for \$500. *El Sol* bought the second bond. Several other Mexican American businesses followed, at \$500 each.

When the night was over, \$90,000 in bond money had been raised. The drive continued on to raise more than \$200,000.<sup>27</sup>

Children continued to roam the streets, collecting rubber, cigarettes and money for war bonds. Stories of the community participation continued to be trumpeted in *El Mensajero* and lauded in *El Sol*. Newspaper articles told the story of the war, and kept readers abreast as to what their sons and daughters were facing. One publication printed a full page detailing the soldiers

And so, the community passed the time. People stayed busy, honoring their loved ones in the war. Waiting for them to come home. Through the early months of 1945, Germany slowly came under Allied control. In the second half of 1945, the U.S. government would add an unprecedented page to the history books in its effort to force Japan into submission.

## A blinding flash and a violent blast

**O**n the last day of April, 1945, Hitler sat in a bunker with his new bride, Eva Braun, at his side. The Russians were two blocks away. His Italian counterpart Benito Mussolini had been hanged. Across the countryside, his military forces were surrendering.

In the enormity of his genocidal reign, it is ironic that Hitler personally killed just one person during World War II – himself. Within days, his closest companions had fled, committed suicide or were captured. The Nazi regime had crumbled.

In January, after having reached the beaches of Luzon, commanders began exploring the possibilities of pushing an attack into Japan’s main islands. In May 1945, formal planning began on what would be called Operation Downfall. The Bushmasters 158<sup>th</sup> was slated as the hard edge of this campaign, detailing its invasion of islands just south of Kyushu on Oct. 27.<sup>28</sup>

This would never happen. A worried U.S. government feared the expansion of Communist Russia, as it pushed toward Japan from the north. Admiral William Leahy gave a frightening number of possible casualties he expected in the attack. He predicted 250,000 Americans would be killed or injured just on the island of Kyushu. Another general suggested the entire operation could cost one million lives.

The time had come to pull a deadly card the U.S. had been holding for four years.

When Ralph Chavarria of Phoenix joined the fight two and a half years before, he could not have known he'd be on hand for one of modern history's most important moments. Drafted at age 27, he would serve as a firefighter on Tinian in the Northern Mariana Islands in Micronesia and see no combat, though he was on deck for trips to sea when a pilot had crashed into the ocean.

Long before the sun rose on Aug. 9, 1945, he and his crew stood at the end of a runway on Tinian Island, just as they had three days before. "At five-minute intervals, three planes would take off. All we thought was 'suppose the plane would not take off (and) crash here, what would happen to this island?'" he recalled 60 years later.<sup>29</sup>

Chavarria's fears were well founded. A bomb nicknamed Fat Boy was stowed on the B-29 that sped down the runway and up into the night sky. Three days before, the world had been stunned by the first atomic bomb detonation in Hiroshima. For hours just one message was transmitted from somewhere outside of Hiroshima, describing Fat Boy's deadly brother, Little Man, "violent, large special-type bomb, giving the appearance of magnesium." It had exploded with a "blinding flash and a violent blast."

At 11:02 a.m. three days later, Fat Boy was detonated over Nagasaki and 75,000 Japanese died. Six days later, Japan surrendered.

By war's end, 1,875 Arizona soldiers had died in World War II. More than 600 were from Maricopa County. Scan a list of the fallen, and a large number have recognizably Hispanic surnames. (At least 150 in Maricopa County).<sup>30</sup>

Nobody truly knows how many Hispanic Americans and Mexicans served during World War II. The U.S. War Dept. kept no known record of Hispanics who served in the armed forces – except Puerto Ricans (53,000 served between 1940-46). But some scholars have come to the conclusion that between 375,000 and 500,000 Latinos and Latino Americans joined from across the U.S. When considering they were only 3 percent of the American population at the time, this is a notable number<sup>31</sup> – 2.5 million Mexican Americans lived in the United States in 1940.

Boeing B-29 Superfortress "Enola Gay" landing on Tinian island after the atomic bombing mission on Hiroshima, Japan. (U.S. Air Force photo)



PHOTO COURTESY U.S. AIR FORCE ARCHIVES

## The men come home

**“W**e got to the Statue of Liberty. Then we landed and they had bands playing and everything else. We kissed the ground. We didn’t know what to do. And then we went to Camp Hamilton. And they had a big cake on the table and they had good stuff there. With a sign that said, ‘Welcome home, heroes!’ in the middle of the table.”<sup>32</sup>

That is how Sgt. Pete Dimas remembered his homecoming from World War II. After four months in a prison camp, he’d been rescued in April 1945.

Many felt as American as ever. They glowed in the heroes’ welcome.

Silvestre Herrera, Arizona’s first WWII Medal of Valor honoree, was lavished with the most attention when he came home that August. Gov. Sydney P. Osborn announced August 14, 1945, to be “Herrera Day,” and had businesses along Central Avenue remove signs saying “No Mexican Trade Wanted.” A parade was organized in Herrera’s honor. Phoenicians started a donation drive and raised almost \$14,000 to provide him and his family a new home.<sup>33</sup>

But other heroes, such as Mike Gomez, found only a quiet train platform when they returned home. No crowd – just anxious families waiting at the station to greet their arrival.

“You had to prepare yourself when returning: There was no one to receive you,” Gomez said, referring to his arrival by train in Phoenix. “Only the family. Luckily, we Latinos have more unity.” His family hadn’t seen him in some time. His wife paced nervously when she was unable to recognize which soldier was her husband.<sup>34</sup>

“I had to point to myself and say ‘It’s me, it’s me!’” Gomez recalls with a laugh.

Once Silvestre Herrera’s ticker-tape parade was over and the marching bands went home, Latino soldiers looked around to find nothing had truly changed for them. Their barrios still stood in dust and basic survival mode; still ignored by the city proper.

When the war ended, many people lost their jobs and returned to working the crop fields. But their challenges were far more than employment, or being forced to sit in the back balcony at a movie theater.

The day these men returned from World War II, Phoenix did not open its doors wide to them as they might have expected. They were still locked out of housing opportunities. Segregation had its grip on the Latino population, similar to other minorities. Many of the communities occupied by Latinos, African Americans and Asians were on the southern fringes of Phoenix. A sense of patriotic inclusion made some forget they were not welcome. They were swiftly reminded.

Ralph Chavarria came home to his wife, Consuelo, and his son, Ernie, in 1946. His brother joined him at a central Phoenix bar to enjoy a couple 25 cent beers. But they had to pay \$2 for the cold brew.

“So then, we ordered more,” Ralph explained in an interview with a local newspaper “And here comes a big, old, fat man. He came back without beer and said, ‘Can’t you read between the lines?’ The prejudice was still there.”<sup>35</sup>

But sometimes Latinos were reminded of the scorn much more painfully. Old Vincent Canales and his wife, who owned the Ramona Drug Store, joined their son, Armando, and the rest of the family for a few drinks at the Pekoe Club on south Central Avenue. They were out to celebrate their son's return from the war. He had suffered three long years in Japanese prison camps after being captured on the island of Corregidor.

With such joy on their minds, they couldn't have expected the night would turn bitter. But several in the crowd were angered that these Mexican Americans had ventured into their bar for a drink. Soon an altercation became a fight and, in the confines of the nightclub, the Canales were faced with a hateful mob. The crowd surged toward them.

Most escaped with minor cuts and bruises. But after having survived tragedies as a prisoner of war, Armando was sent to the hospital with severe injuries suffered in his own country. Two men were arrested, but the instigators of the mob seemed to have slipped into the night undetected.<sup>36</sup>

Others, though spared physical harm, found they were refused one of life's most basic needs: a home.

After battling through the jungles of the Philippines and across the islands of a volatile Japanese empire, the Bushmasters had returned to Arizona as the state's pride and joy. And hoping to rediscover normal life. One member of the 158th, David Perez, decided to use his G.I. Bill to finance a home for his family.

He stepped into an office of the Valley National Bank and waited for the loan officer to speak with him. When Perez explained his desire to buy a home and held out his military certificate, the man was supportive. "Get a good quote, prints. Get bids on the house and then come back."

Perez was thrilled. He tracked down an architect and worked on a bid to build their new home. When he got a low bid of \$4,500, he felt the cards had fallen in his favor, "Oh! Got it made!" He returned to the bank and dropped off his paperwork with the loan officer.

But when the loan officer called him, Perez fell victim to the city's social taboos. "Sorry, Mr. Perez, but we don't finance anything south of the tracks – south of Washington."

David Perez gave a wry smile in one interview shortly before his passing in 2004, and explained it succinctly. "At that time, we couldn't buy north of the downtown area anyhow. And they wouldn't finance south. So it was like a fish without a bowl. What you gonna do? You got the certificate. But no one to take it."<sup>37</sup>

These circumstances inspired the founding of Post 41.

**H**ousing segregation in Phoenix had been practiced informally for many years, creating areas such as South Phoenix. But the National Housing Act of 1934 allowed the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to create maps that showed what they perceived as high-risk areas for banks lending money. Outlined in red, these danger zones consistently included minority neighborhoods. Banks would then base their lending decisions on these maps, denying mortgage loans to people living within the red-lined areas.

With no money coming for improvements to homes, or for the building of new homes, these poorer neighborhoods began to decline further.

In 1944, the G.I. Bill was created, giving numerous opportunities to soldiers returning from WWII – including guaranteed mortgage loans, job training, and money to cover times of unemployment.

Minority veterans would apply for the benefits in hopes of buying a new home, often in the clean, modern suburbs that were growing around Phoenix. But realtors would avoid selling to minorities, fearing they might lose business from the Anglo community, and that neighborhoods with minorities would lose value.

In 1968, the Fair Housing Act would help eliminate discriminatory practices. The Community Reinvestment Act of 1977 would help further, by effectively eliminating discriminatory red-lining practices.

## Organizing toward a goal

In 1945, the American Legion Luke-Greenway Post 1 was the largest in Arizona and the only post in Phoenix. Founded in 1919 at the same time as the national organization, the post sat north of Van Buren Street on 7th Avenue, near Grand Avenue. Some Latinos joined the post after returning from World War II, but they were never truly welcomed. They were tolerated, but sensing the risk of outright racism, the Latino veterans decided to find their own way. And they had a goal.

War changes people. It revises their perspective of the world. Latino veterans returned to Phoenix wanting to achieve what they deserved: equal opportunity for their families and inclusion in all aspects of the greater community. They felt they were partners in the Great American Democratic experiment, now more than ever. To achieve these ends, they used the best tool learned on the battlefields of World War II. They organized.

Ray Martinez had come home in October 1945 after his tour of duty as a radio operator on the USS Makassar Strait, an escort carrier operating in the Pacific on numerous missions from Okinawa to the Philippines.

Ray had begun rekindling some of his old friendships with other veterans who had also returned to the barrio. One was Frank “Pipa” Fuentes, a rebellious youth who had become Arizona’s welterweight boxing champion for a time, then quit his job as a railroad signal operator in 1943 to fight in the war.

Fuentes had a proposal.

After the cold reception from American Legion Post 1, Frank Fuentes decided to organize an American Legion post where Latinos would feel welcome. He was gathering veterans to help; Pete Martinez, Pete G. Dimas, Carlos Ontiveros, Phil Fierros, Alex Delgado, Ruben M. Parra and others had already joined the effort. They invited Martinez to join. Their ideas intrigued him.

When Frank spoke with Ray, the group had already begun the early steps to convince the American Legion to provide them with a charter for their own post. Frank Fuentes attempted to obtain a new charter from the Arizona American Legion office. Discussions began over whether or not there should be a separate post for Mexican Americans, and the charter application was stalled in the state legion’s executive committee.

“They were a little suspicious,” Ray Martinez recalled in a 1980 interview. “I guess they thought we were going to open up a beer club and have fights and gambling.”<sup>38</sup>

Solidarity and persistence would help them achieve their goals. The new post was eventually approved and the new American Legion Thunderbird Post 41 received its charter by November 1945, creating Arizona’s first Hispanic post and the second post in Phoenix at the time.

Ray Martinez would later remind interviewers on many occasions that the goal had always been much more than simply founding a place for camaraderie. “When we got out of the service, some of us knew, we had a mission, because we were not going to go back to the discrimination we had suffered before. We knew that was the time, right after the war, everybody

had a good feeling, everybody loved the service men and (we) thought, well this is the time to make the move.”<sup>39</sup>

Nor were they alone in their ideas. At the dawn of the baby boom generation, human rights had become a focus for many. In 1946, the Congress of American Women organized to fight for women’s rights in the U.S. The Civil Rights Congress was also formed to help Blacks living in Detroit. Like magnets to their cause, activists began to unite.

The Hispanic community was no exception. In Texas, the American G.I. Forum was formed in 1948 by Hispanic Americans. In southern California, unity leagues fought injustices against impoverished minorities.

Segregation was an issue being met head-on across the nation as minorities became empowered and educated. But Post 41 was special in that these were barrio kids who’d come home. Many had no college degrees; most had no high school diplomas. They were factory workers and farm workers. And none of them truly had any idea how to run an American Legion post.

They had no building yet. Frank Fuentes offered to shut down his family’s restaurant one night a week for their meetings. And so on Tuesdays the small group of 16 members converged on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and Jefferson to sit in the dining room of La Poblanita restaurant. Carlos Ontiveros was briefly commander. Then after receiving the charter, Ray Martinez was voted in, officially becoming the first Hispanic commander of an Arizona American Legion post. Frank Fuentes served as chaplain, a post he held consistently until becoming commander in 1955.

In the first meeting, they discussed the poverty in their neighborhoods and the discrimination their families were enduring. Their thoughts were jotted down on a napkin. They may not have learned yet how to run an American Legion post, but it was clear what their agenda would be. Ray explains, “We talked about how to organize because there was a lot of discrimination against Mexicans and we thought it was time to start fighting back... Discrimination (was) the number one issue. We wanted a piece of the pie, too.”<sup>40</sup>

And they would not be alone in their fight. As the napkin filled with ideas, one of Frank Fuentes’ old grade school buddies, a young man named Barry, looked on. As he’d grown, the youth was obsessed with learning to fly airplanes and eventually became the politically active general manager of a local department store. And here he was, at Post 41. In time he would be known to the world as Sen. Barry Goldwater. The same year the post received its charter, Goldwater had returned as a brigadier general in the U.S. Air Force and helped to organize the 158<sup>th</sup> into the new Arizona National Guard. He had been courting politics, but found that, despite growing up in his mother’s Episcopalian faith, his Jewish heritage was given the same cold shoulder as other minorities. Goldwater saw in the Latino cause something that could help his own.

Despite the group’s lack of experience as legionnaires, they had some experience in social issues. Before joining the fight in World War II, Ray Martinez had already been involved in community activities as a recreation director at the Madison Street Settlement on 9th Street and Madison.<sup>41</sup>

To raise money for baseball and other events at Madison Park, Ray would gather a handful of his boxing students and take them to the Biltmore shopping mall. They would set up a boxing ring and put on a show. People tossed money into the ring, which the young boxers scooped up to help aid their cause.<sup>42</sup>

A decade later, as Post 41 was fast becoming an institution in the community, one might argue that the roots of its success could be found in the social networking of pre-war gatherings such as those at Madison Street Settlement. Ray drew on his experience to create programs for the community.

By 1947, the post was supporting one of Ray and Frank's joys – a local boxing team they coached.<sup>43</sup> Heavyweight boxer Manuel Larios from Phoenix College would win the 1948 Arizona Golden Gloves tournament by knocking his opponent down three times – in the second round. That year, their boxing team walked away with four championships and another reaching the finals.<sup>44</sup> In January 1948, they headed to Los Angeles to compete in the regional competition.

But as 1947 ended, the men of Post 41 had done much more than teach young boxers. They had partnered with a sorority and the local Campfire Girls office to send six girls from Grant Park community to a summer camp in Prescott for 10 days. Post 41 was also providing transportation for softball teams from both Grant and Harmon parks and organized blood drives. They held dances several times a year. During the fall they began holding an annual barbecue at Grant Park. It brought everyone in the community together.<sup>45</sup>

The battlefields of Asia and Europe were now a memory, and the members of Post 41 would begin earning respect through the civilian battles they fought. Their first challenge was a swimming pool in Tempe.

## Unshared waters

**I**n 1923, Tempe finished construction of its first recreation facilities: Tempe Beach Park. Built near a popular swimming area used since 1916, it was the city's attempt to avoid drowning and the threat of disease that came with swimming in the river or nearby canals. The result was an Olympic-size creation, hosting swim meets that brought young athletes from across the Southwest to compete.<sup>46</sup>

It also brought a boy named Ray Martinez, living in Tempe. The children in the Tempe barrios had heard there was a new pool being built. When construction had completed and the pool was ready for use, all the children came to see their new treasure. But when Ray walked up to the gate, there was a sign: "No dogs or Mexicans allowed." The pool was off-limits – a policy enforced by the Tempe Chamber of Commerce and sanctioned by the City of Tempe.<sup>47</sup>

Remarkably few complaints were made against the policy for almost

20 years. Most members of the Hispanic community found satisfaction swimming in the open canal on Price Road or trekking to the rapids at Blue Point on the Salt River, when it flowed.<sup>48</sup> The complaints that were voiced often went unanswered and unsolved. One example is when a St. Mary's girls club traveled to Tempe Beach in hopes of having a picnic. Several chaperones traveled with them, including Lillie Perez's mother.

When the manager refused entry to Lillie and her mother, based on the segregation policy, the priests and chaperones tried to gain entrance, explaining that Lillie was a good kid who had never been rejected entry from anywhere before. Little girls are harmless. As justification, some of the ladies gestured past the arched cobblestone entry at two other Mexican children who had been allowed to swim – Adeline and Pauline Loza.<sup>49</sup>

After the manager spun around to spot the two kids that had gone in undetected, they were thrown out as well.

Even though Rev. M. Ignatius of St. Mary's Church sent a disapproving letter that detailed the event, the problem would not be solved until the 1940s.

In 1942, the Tempe Chamber of Commerce turned over control and management of Tempe Beach to a new Tempe Beach Committee.<sup>50</sup> In early June, another incident spurred an attempt for even harder pool desegregation. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Council 110, stepped forward to take up this cause.

Two Mexican American women had gone to the pool on a date with Mexican Air Force cadets training at Williams Air Force Base. The cadets were part of a group from several South and Central American countries that had been included in the military effort, possibly to reinforce President Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy" and show Latin American support for the U.S. during the war.<sup>51</sup>

Before World War II, the "Good Neighbor Policy" was Roosevelt's attempt at repairing severely damaged relationships with Latin American countries and to prevent the world's unstable politics and violence from reaching U.S. soil. Unfortunately, a grand U.S. policy does not always spread into small communities with contradictory views.

Word of the latest Tempe Pool incident reached Maria A. Garcia, head of LULAC Council 110's Phoenix Discrimination Committee. She contacted Placida Garcia Smith at Friendly House. Together they notified the members of their LULAC council. The Phoenix Discrimination Committee was given the go-ahead to investigate the incident further and share what it found. It was perfect timing. There was an opportunity later that month to report the findings at the 1942 LULAC convention in Albuquerque, N.M. But they had to act quickly.

Garcia and her committee secured a meeting with Tempe Mayor W.W. Cole. As the meeting began, Garcia told Cole that their discussion would be brought up at the upcoming national LULAC convention. Then she voiced the committee's displeasure with the treatment of the young Mexican American women and the Mexican cadets, reminding the mayor of President Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy."

But the mayor was unfazed. He took his stance bluntly: The city had no

control over the park's policies because Tempe had simple-leased the land to the Tempe Chamber of Commerce which was beyond the city's "jurisdiction" and made its own rules and regulations. He could not help her.

Finding their grievances blocked at the mayor's office, the committee next approached Max Connolly, president of the Tempe Chamber of Commerce. Again they were stopped short. Connolly flatly refused to make any changes without the approval of the chamber board and the Tempe Beach Committee.<sup>52</sup>

Garcia was true to her word. At the national LULAC conference in Albuquerque, she related the ineffective meeting. New Mexico Sen. Dennis Chavez was on hand to hear Council 110's concerns about the Tempe Beach incident. Sen. Chavez had been integral to the creation of the "Good Neighbor Policy" and also was a cousin to Placida Garcia-Smith of the Friendly House.

On June 14 in Albuquerque, Chavez spoke at a LULAC dedication ceremony of the Barelás Community Center. There he called on LULAC members to bring to light any occurrence of discrimination in their local communities. He explained that they had the "backing of the entire nation in its will to promote friendly relations in Latin America."<sup>53</sup>

Chavez made no direct mention of the pool incident, but the local Council 110 felt inspired nonetheless. The council sought out the two women who had been turned down at Tempe Beach and obtained legal affidavits describing what had occurred.

Council 110 had begun to increase community pressure. But the Tempe Beach Committee continued to slip out of their hands, denying the changes LULAC desired.

In 1943, a federal court ruled Tempe Beach's segregation was unconstitutional. But the Tempe Beach Committee continued to stand by its segregation and defiance of the ruling.

It believed the federal ruling was irrelevant to swimming pool regulations because it was a citizen's committee, and no laws had been broken. Indeed, no city laws had even been written to desegregate Tempe Beach. The pool area was still off-limits to Hispanics.<sup>54</sup>

As more pressure was applied by LULAC, the committee deflected its efforts. Rather than integrate the pool, the Tempe Beach Committee announced that it had reserved \$500 "for the purpose of constructing a second swimming pool for the exclusive use of the citizens of Mexican extraction." They then asked the Tempe City Council to donate land for this new pool.

Not only was the desegregation issue being dodged, the idea was never feasible. It came at a time when the U.S. was asking for anything communities could offer help in the war effort. The city of Tempe certainly wasn't going to authorize needed materials to build a second pool.

A priest at Tempe Catholic Church, Rev. Bernard Gordon, attempted to help. In late November 1944, he held a fundraising drive to collect the money needed to build another pool in Tempe. But he was unsuccessful and the alternate pool was never built.<sup>55</sup>

The LULAC council found its attempts stalled at every turn. The

decades-old policy refused to die. They needed help.

Three men approached Post 41 soon after it had received its charter; Danny Rodriguez, Raymond Terminal and Genaro Martinez. It was known throughout the Latino community that Post 41 had formed in hopes of making a difference. The Post's new commander, Ray Martinez, listened as they explained how LULAC's attempts at desegregation had been derailed.

A long discussion followed among the members of Post 41. What could or would they do? Ray Martinez was asked to be chairman of the effort. Then a plan of action was agreed upon. Post 41's involvement would stay behind the scenes. Being outsiders from Phoenix could damage the cause.

The first step would be to meet with each member individually, taking away the Tempe Beach Committee's safety in numbers and group mentality. This would make it easier for the post and the Tempe veterans to explain why the "No Mexicans" policy was wrong and sway their vote at an upcoming meeting to decide if the rules would be changed.

Meanwhile, friendships were built with outspoken and important businessmen in Tempe to gain backing for their cause. Connections were beginning to grow in the community, providing much of the influence Post 41 would hold in the coming years.

The first to step forward in support was Dwight "Red" Harkins, who had begun his movie theater business 13 years before and eventually developed a solid connection to Phoenix Latino communities when he married the former Alice Peralta. Then Lawrence and Mittie Carr, two brothers that owned Carr Mortuary, joined Harkins. The Curry twins followed. Michael and Edward Jr. ran the Tempe hardware store their father had started in 1889 on south Mill in downtown Tempe. These were the respected names of Tempe life, and they were backing the desegregation cause.

As these relationships formed, they were able to whittle their opponents down to two chamber members who could never be convinced to allow integration of the pool. Harrold Nevitt, a service station owner and Reginald J.H. Stroud.

Ray Martinez was told of a chamber meeting that became heated when Stroud and Harkins sparred:

*"Dr. Stroud said: 'If you allow these Mexicans in there, they're gonna tear the damn place up! We won't be able to keep up with the damage!' And Dwight 'Red' Harkins said: 'Well, how much damage do you think they'll make?' And Dr. Stroud said, 'At least \$10,000 worth!' So, I heard that Dwight 'Red' Harkins wrote him out a check for the \$10,000 and said: 'Look. Here's a check. I'm going to give it to you. If they tear up the place, you can go ahead and cash my check and pay for the damages. But only for damages for the place.' They say that after Dr. Stroud died and they were processing his paper work, they found that \$10,000 check. It was still there."<sup>56</sup>*

Eventually a date was set to vote on the issue: May 21, 1946.

In the days leading up to the vote, Arizona State College joined the fight. Barbara Crumpler, president of the local Beta Phi chapter of Kappa Delta Pi, wrote a letter to the Tempe Beach Committee urging integration at their pool.

*"In the interests of true democracy, we urge that admission to the Tempe Beach swimming pool be on the basis of cleanliness rather than on racial differences. Representing as you do the citizens of Tempe, we feel that you cannot help recognizing the injustice of the present un-American practice of refusing to admit clean and decent citizens of Mexican heritage."*<sup>70</sup>

With a successful first step, the next was to join the Tempe Chamber of Commerce and begin several debates over segregation. Ramón Padilla and Genaro Martinez, two of the men who had approached Post 41 for their help, announced their desire to join the chamber of commerce in May; the same month that the chamber was to vote on desegregation of the pool.

Ramon and Genaro lobbied members to accept them into the chamber's folds. As a backup plan if their membership was voted against, "Red" Harkins set aside \$2,500 for Ray Martinez of Post 41 to use in hiring a lawyer to file a desegregation lawsuit against the chamber.<sup>59</sup>

The money was never needed.

On May 21, 1946, Genaro Martinez, Danny Rodriguez and Ramon Padilla were admitted as members of the Tempe Chamber of Commerce. In the same meeting, the "No Mexicans Allowed" policy was stopped by a vote of 15-14.<sup>61</sup>

The Tempe and Phoenix veterans thought their fight was over. But they faced one more hurdle.

The policy had been changed, but the chamber made a move to put new stipulations in place. The pool was to be open on a limited basis, and some members spoke of restricting use of the pool to residents of Tempe only. The Tempe Beach Committee was still in charge and deciding who "qualified" for admission to the swimming pool. This was still unacceptable, and another vote was planned, days later.<sup>62</sup>

The dean of Arizona State College (ASU), J.O. Grimes, would type up his concerns and advised subversively that the restrictions were inappropriate by suggesting that restrictions were a good idea. He then suggested non-racial restrictions: "Cleanliness of skin rather than color of skin should be the accepted basic principle for entrance to any pool. Cleanliness of conduct should be the second criteria."

On the day of the new vote, numerous absentees made the hopes of full equality seem distant. None from the community appeared. Danny Rodriguez stood alone before the committee asking them to vote in favor.

In a narrow victory, the pool was opened to all races. The Tempe veterans and American Legion Post 41 had succeeded.<sup>63</sup> Finally, three years after the federal court had outlawed segregation at the pool, it was opened to all. Almost a quarter century of exclusion had ended.

The achievement did come with a cost. Danny Rodriguez found himself blackballed after the effort. He received threats and couldn't find a job.<sup>64</sup>

He soon found it necessary to move. In a 1993 interview by David Solliday, Tempe resident Ray Chavarria shed some light on one reason he might have left: the lack of support when he needed it most. The entire Hispanic community was behind him 100 percent, but Danny's view of the community changed after he'd stood before the court alone.

*“He went that morning. How do you think that Danny must have felt, to have the people supporting, encourage him and everything, and he gets all the information he can together, compiles it to make his presentation, and he goes to the courtroom, and he starts looking, and none of his people from the barrios were there. And then the judge calls him to make his presentation. He made such a wonderful presentation that he won! (Was he suing the city?) Yes, I think he was. I can’t recall what it was, but he was left alone.*

*“He must have felt very lonely. When he walked out of (the chamber meeting), he must have really walked out with a lot of bitterness, because Danny moved away from Tempe. And some of us, I don’t know who may know where he’s at. But he was one of the heroes, another individual, really heroes, when prejudice and discrimination was practiced in Tempe.”<sup>65</sup>*

Soon after the changes took place, his 7-year-old niece, Becky, caught him gazing into the desegregated pool as she swam. Worried, she asked what he was doing. Danny looked up at her: “I’m looking at a change of time. And it is good.”

## A home for every veteran

**W**hen soldiers came home from World War II, the legendary housing boom had not quite begun in Phoenix. The entire Valley was still recovering from a sudden shift of focus during the war. The area had become a main production center for equipment needed in the war effort. Now that the war was over, the local economy had to swerve in a new direction yet again. One resource that continued to be scarce was housing for the workers. Many communities had to build temporary housing to provide for the workers.

These problems had begun to grow severe during the Depression years. Now that the war had ended, soldiers across the nation were coming home and finding themselves forced to live in tents, street cars or worse.

In Phoenix, Ray Martinez, the commander of Post 4I, saw the barrios suffering as well. “During the war, there was a shortage of housing. And after the war, veterans came home and they had to double up with others. I mean, there’s 10 or 12 living to a house, and we were very much concerned about it, and so were the officials.”<sup>66</sup>

Everyone was suffering. Not just Hispanics. In early 1946, the Veterans’ Emergency Housing Program was formed to battle the problem. Congress made funds available to municipalities so that veteran housing could be built. When they were told they could receive 150 pre-fab homes to use for emergency housing in Phoenix, city officials voted to provide them at three different sites.

One hundred homes for Anglo veterans would be built near downtown.

Twenty five homes for African American veterans near the Mathew T. Henson Housing Project in South Phoenix.

Then they announced where the Hispanic veterans military housing would

be placed. The next challenge was about to begin for Thunderbird Post 41.

Like crossing a new beachhead, Ray Martinez dove forward, challenging the status quo. There would be no acting behind the scenes, as with the Tempe Beach issue.

The Anglo homes were to be placed at an abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camp on 10 acres, near 809 N. 19th Street in the Garfield housing community. The Mexican American units were tentatively planned for the site of an old city dump at 5th Street and Henshaw Road (present-day Buckeye Road).<sup>67</sup>

On March 23, 1946, Ray Martinez voiced his concerns to City Manager Roy Heyne. Promises were made “to cover the dump; landscape it, and make it look pretty.”<sup>68</sup> But this was unacceptable to the Mexican American veterans. It was unsanitary, with open-air toilets and contamination. Nor was it even large enough to provide space for yards. Ray suggested putting the houses at Harmon Park near the Marcos de Niza project or that they be integrated into the 10 acres of land where the Anglos were to be located.<sup>69</sup>

The city agreed to cooperate with Post 41, and Ray spoke before the municipal parks board to ask that Harmon Park be made available as a site for the project. City officials instead elected to combine the Mexican American homes with the 16<sup>th</sup> and Roosevelt street project. The city engineer cited excessive costs of installing utilities at the proposed Mexican American location as the reason their idea was abandoned.<sup>70</sup>

Anglo property owners in the Garfield neighborhood quickly became uncomfortable with the idea of Mexican Americans moving in. They banded together with Anglo veterans to form the Garfield Property Owners Protective Association. Eddie H. Poole, a fellow veteran who had fought at Iwo Jima, was to be the organization’s leader against integration.

Eddie Poole stood before the Phoenix City Council and denounced the idea as a travesty in his eyes. Ray Martinez was there to witness his words. “My God it was the most awful thing you would want to hear,” he said. “Those damn Mexicans, you put them in there, they’re gonna be raping, they’re gonna be robbing and you know, we’re going to have all kinds of problems. And we just don’t want them because we need to protect our families.’ It was so terrible that the members of the city council were just absolutely devastated, you could see that they were completely uncomfortable. When you start using language that rough, well then that’s what can cause riots.”<sup>71</sup>

When Ray’s time came, he stood and explained the absurdity of such an argument. He reminded them that they had all fought together. Why couldn’t they live together?

Suddenly, another man stood up. Kenny Rosenbaum. He was a Jewish lawyer and a member of B’nai B’rith. “My goodness, here we are. We’ve just been through a war that was mainly motivated by hate, and here we have somebody still spewing hate as bad as Hitler did over there.”<sup>72</sup>

Then labor leader John Dutch rose up and Communist party leader Morris Graham. The two defended Ray as an upright citizen and supported integrated housing projects.

The city council took a brief recess to think things over. Whereas Ray and his supporters had spoken reasonably, they were still stung by the harsh words of Eddie Poole. Fifteen minutes later the council members returned to make their announcement. “The city council has decided to take this entire matter into consideration. And we’ll decide at a later date.” Ray Martinez would not find the answer he sought that day.

But it was an election year, Ray remembers. “The council was voted out. Ray Busey was elected mayor and they immediately said, ‘Integrate it. It goes together.’”

## Going down hard

**T**he decision was made to allow 24 of the Garfield site’s federal housing units to go to Mexican American veterans. Prefabricated housing that had been in use during the war was loaded on trains and shipped from the state of Washington and from Bisbee to be used in Phoenix for the project.

No time was wasted. On July 2 Eddie Poole and members of the community argued before the city commissioners and the new mayor of Phoenix, explaining that the integration of Mexican Americans into their area would lower property values and invite crime into their community.

Phoenix Mayor Ray Busey had just taken office in June 1946. He was an unexpected windfall at the time for Ray Martinez and the members of Post 41. He knew Spanish. He spoke on behalf of Black pastors and the disabled. He had already been involved in numerous civil betterment groups and was in constant communication with Emmett McLoughlin, the most powerful social activist in Phoenix at the time.<sup>73</sup>

And in the face of Poole’s demands, Mayor Busey stood his ground. The project was to continue. He explained that their concerns were minor because the housing was only temporary. The federal government contract stated that the temporary housing would be removed within two years of the end of the housing crisis.

Soon the meeting became a shouting match. John Dutch and Morris Graham spoke out in support of integration. Others would not have it.

Even a local church leader joined the fray against the Hispanic veterans. The Rev. Edward Lester of Immanuel Baptist Church, a few blocks from the proposed site, claimed to have seen a “great deal of animosity of people around the church.” Claiming no prejudice, he hoped the city would change policy and “forestall possible overt action.”<sup>74</sup>

The mayor explained, “We would have to break faith with all humanity if it were stopped. We cannot draw any line. We have to look at it as a humanitarian matter.”<sup>75</sup>

Later, Ray Martinez was quoted on his disgust at the church’s stand against integration. “I can’t believe that any group or any man supposed to teach the teachings of the Lord could make such protests that tend to further

discrimination and racial prejudices. Also this group is to be reminded that we just finished a war where we defeated a nation that believed in the principles of the super race.”

Before nightfall, a mass protest of integration was planned for the following day on the campus of Garfield Elementary School.

That next evening, the protest begun with a change in tactics. With city officials plainly refusing to change their plan for limited integration of veteran’s housing, Eddie Poole stepped up and spoke. “We don’t hate anybody. We’re not fighting Mexicans, or Spanish Americans, or any other race. We’re fighting the type of shacks they’re going to be building in our neighborhood. Just look at the lumber – they’re fire hazards. They’re not fit for dogs to live in.”

The Garfield Association was to now target the temporary housing, sections of which had already begun to arrive by train from Washington and were being stacked next to the construction site.

Poole continued: “We believe we can kill this thing with signatures.” The crowd surged forward to sign a petition that had been brought to the meeting. The petition cited the project’s risk factors as: lower property values, depreciation of land, undesirable community, fire hazards, already noticeable depreciation of homes in the neighborhood as a result of the project, non-compliance with city building codes and a general undue burden on the community.

Poole asked for contributions to pay for the legal costs and further denied any racism behind their goals. He explained that several Spanish American families already lived in the area, were good neighbors and were at the event.

Ray Martinez stepped forward in an attempt to stop the flow of signatures that could threaten the building of the veterans’ housing entirely. “I am an American. Mexicans are born across the border. I was born right down the street, attended this (Garfield) school, and was a member of the scout troop at the Garfield church. If you block this thing now, you are hurting every veteran. These homes will be better than living in tents. Please don’t sign any petition that will keep your boys from having a home.”

He recounted the temporary nature of the housing and explained that supplies were scarce. When he had finished, he was met with some applause. But before his words could sink in, Poole overpowered his point by reminding the crowd that this fight was about the quality of construction – not against the veterans.

The labor leader, John Dutch, again tried to voice his support of the integrated veterans’ housing. But he and another speaker, future State Representative James Carreón, were quieted with shouts from the crowd as it pushed forward to

Phoenix Mayor Ray Busey (1946-1948) proved helpful to the minority cause. Before he left office he created the Charter Government Committee.

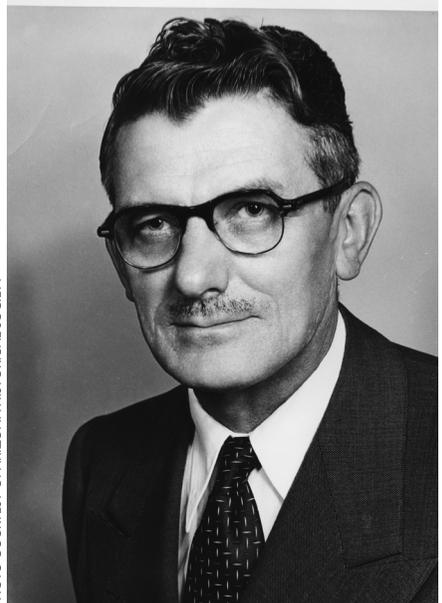


PHOTO COURTESY OF ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

continue signing the petitions.<sup>77</sup>

By week's end, on June 6, the newspaper announced that the city had voted unanimously to continue with the project. James Marsh of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, who introduced the resolution, said he was "bitterly opposed to racial discrimination in veterans' housing."

He continued: "The word is out that the housing project will be filled with a lot of zoot-suiters. That's hogwash."<sup>78</sup>

The FPHA (Federal Public Housing Administration) awarded a contract for more than \$200,000 to the Dell E. Webb Construction Co. for reassembling the houses and connecting city utilities.<sup>79</sup>

This was one of many federal housing contracts to Del Webb that gave his company early success. It provided the experience that later led to the creation of Sun City, and a nationwide change in housing developments.

That day, concrete was poured for the foundation of the homes and ditches were dug for utilities to be laid. Promises were made to landscape the area and paint the houses. They hoped to be finished in August or September of that year.

The 4<sup>th</sup> of July was a relatively peaceful Thursday that led into a long, festive weekend. But Eddie Poole had not yet given up his fight. When Tuesday came, he marched in to file the signed petitions against the housing unit. He again explained that he'd been authorized to demand that the mayor and the commissioners post a bond swearing to the teardown of the project in two years.

Mayor Busey looked up, over his glasses, "No, I won't."

"When I assumed this office," Busey continued, "I raised my hand and took an oath to carry out my duties to the best of my ability. A bond wouldn't be any better than my word."<sup>80</sup>

The city had already signed a contract with the federal government. That was enough of an agreement for the mayor.

The Garfield Association would continue its protests through the following months. It brought a suit against the Public Housing Authority to stop the project. On numerous occasions, American Legion Thunderbird Post 41 would spar with Eddie Poole and the Garfield Property Owners Protective Association. Finally, on Dec. 11, 1946, the issue came before the Arizona Supreme Court.

And the court overturned the case. Integration of housing was to be upheld.

It took time, and numerous setbacks, but the 156-unit project was completed by the end of the year and opened in February 1947. Just 24 units were provided to Mexican Americans.

It was named the Harry Córdova Housing Project, in honor of a Mexican American Army corporal killed in the Battle of Normandy, June 1944. He was a member of the Army Medical Corps, and the brother of Luis Córdova, who had founded the Latino American Club in the 1930s.

The project operated for more than five years, closing in June 1952, soon after the landowners raised rental fees for the property. By then, 900 veterans and their families had used the frame houses to get on their feet.<sup>81</sup>

Throughout the late 1940s and into the 50s, Garfield then was taken

over by Hispanic populations seeking to be closer to their friends and family, slowly pushing out the Anglos.

But this was a military housing project. There was a larger battle. The city itself was still segregated.

## Covenant busting

*“No lot or tract, or any part thereof, shall be leased, let, occupied, sold or transferred to anyone other than to members of the white or Caucasian race except those of Mexican or Spanish ancestry, and this exclusion shall include those having perceptible strains of Mexican, Spanish, Asiatic, negro or Indian blood.”*

—Race restricting deed in Phoenix.

Life continued as usual beyond the curbs of veteran housing in Phoenix. Latinos were not welcome in the communities of Phoenix proper. Post 41 would again be called upon to fight for the rights to equal housing opportunities.

The great housing explosion of the Western U.S. was about to kick into overdrive and bring thousands of construction jobs.<sup>82</sup> A few hurdles had to be crossed first.

In 1947, a housing construction site was under development at 27<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Van Buren, just beyond the edge of Anglo tolerance of Latino homes. In 1947, Donald Gaylien walked in to the offices for a housing development called Melrose Manor on North 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. He was a well-spoken professor at the American Institute of Foreign Trade. He had returned home after serving in the same naval aviation unit as a future president, George Bush Sr. He easily qualified to purchase a home. As he was prepared to sign papers, he began to speak to his wife in Spanish.<sup>83</sup>

That was a problem. His last name hadn't sounded Mexican. It wasn't until his use of Spanish that he was found to have “perceptible strains of Mexican blood.” The professor was denied his home. Donald Gaylien was also a member of the American Legion Thunderbird Post 41.

After getting word of the incident, the post sent Ray Martinez to investigate. The following weeks would be a test of his patience and resolve.

One day, Ray used his lunch break from driving a city bus on the Duppa Villa route to visit the offices of Stewart Construction Co. to inquire about purchasing a home.

The man's response was not unexpected. “Well, we don't sell to Mexicans or greasers or ... what do you call ‘em? What do you call yourselves?”

Ray was unfazed. “We call ourselves Americans.”

The employee he'd approached continued. “Well, I don't know. They use this word about Mexicans and greasers and spics and you know. Well, anyway – we don't sell to you.”

Ray Martinez walked out. But he returned the next day, much to the dismay of company officials. “So what the hell do you want?”

Ray's reply was succinct. "I want to speak to Mr. Stewart. He's the boss isn't he? Superintendent? The owner of the construction company? He's the developer. I wanna talk to him."

"Well he doesn't wanna talk to you."

Ray told the man, "Well fine, but I'll be here every day 'til he might change his mind."

And he was. He refused to give up. He'd survived worse in the barrios south of Phoenix.

Martinez described the price of patience in an interview years later. "So I'd go every day and then they'd come in and insult me or they came out and spilled water on me and whatever, you know? A lot of indignities and all that.<sup>84</sup>

"One day they decided they had had enough of his visits. "We're goddamned sick and tired of you, Mexican."

He reminded them, "You're in here selling to the public. I'm the public and I'm here to inquire."

Irritated, one man offered a compromise. "If Mr. Stewart will talk to you, will you stop coming?"

"Absolutely." Ray left the office with an appointment set for the following Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.

When Tuesday came Ray returned to meet with the owner. As he arrived, one of the sales managers walked up to him and pointed as he spoke. "Go into Mr. Stewart's office, there. There's a secretary."

As he entered the elusive businessman's office, a secretary rose from her desk. Turning to him she spoke measured and with indignation. "I want you to know one thing. Mr. Stewart is not going to meet with you today, nor any other day. So the best thing you can do is just get the *hell* out of here, and

Post 41 marches  
in the 1948  
Memorial Day  
Parade.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMERICAN LEGION POST 41

stay out of here.”

The commander of Post 41 was not swayed. “Miss,” He began, “I want you to give Mr. Stewart a message.

“You tell Mr. Stewart that he’s using federal money on FHA housing and that the Arizona Bank is providing the money and that I have the money to go to court as early as this next week and we’re going to place an injunction on the money and on this construction job. We’re gonna bring it to a halt. Because you cannot discriminate if you’re using federal money. Against us, as Hispanics, you cannot discriminate.”

Ray drove his point home even further. “Now you tell Mr. Stewart that we have our attorneys ready to go and all they’re waiting for ... is to hear the results of this meeting and I’m going to say, ‘Go.’” (Red Harkins had again donated the money to cover court costs).

“So you say Mr. Stewart doesn’t wanna meet with me. I said he will meet me. Possibly as early as next week, but it’ll be in court ... he will meet me.”

With that, Ray left.

After his workday was over, Ray headed home. His flustered wife caught his attention immediately.

“There’s some guy name of Stewart’s been calling since 4 o’clock this afternoon. Every 10 minutes and I keep telling him you won’t be here ‘til 7!”

Ray was not surprised. “I know what he wants.”

A mere five minutes passed before phone rang again. Mr. Jack Stewart began speaking immediately.

“Ray. I wanna tell you how sorry I am that I wasn’t there to meet with you this afternoon.”

“Well, this is the message I got when I went to your office.”

Stewart was animated in his response. “By golly! They got it all screwed up because I said no such a thing!” There was a pause, then, “Well, listen. You can come out tomorrow. We are selling to any Hispanic that comes up here and just tell ‘em come tomorrow and they’ll be attended to and they’ll be attended to *right away*.”

Ray wasn’t satisfied with just this, nor did he want to risk another refusal to any Hispanic wanting to buy a home. He explained, “All that we want to do is just settle this peacefully but these are the conditions I’m going to set today, in a friendly way.

“Now you probably belong to the homebuilders association. Well now you tell them, the next time, we don’t have the patience.

“If they fail to sell to *one* Hispanic we shall be in court the following day. You tell ‘em that, and anybody in the future. If there’s any discrimination, we are not going to negotiate. We are not going and see you or try to see you. We shall file and tie up your money and try to get you disqualified from these federal FHA funds.

“Can you do that?”

“Mr. Martinez. I will do that.”<sup>85</sup>

The success of the Harry Córdova Project and overcoming the Stewart Construction Co. would give Post 41 the boldness to send a letter petitioning the Executive Director of Public Housing Earl Schnurr to issue an order desegregating the Marcos de Niza Housing Project, managed by Post 41

member Ray Yanez, and opened in 1941.<sup>86</sup>

The 1948 court case *Shelley v. Kraemer* would go one step further by prohibiting the enforcement of racially restrictive housing covenants across the nation. But old habits die hard. Realtors and subdivision salesmen continued to refuse Hispanics seeking to buy homes. The battle was far from over. This can be seen in the story of Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale's determination to buy in the Encanto District of central Phoenix in the 1950s<sup>87</sup>

## Building a home

A year and a half of Tuesday meetings at the restaurant had passed. The Post's membership had swelled to 300. They had become involved in numerous events and functions. It was time for a new home.

Soon after its founding, Post 41 members began the long search for a new home. A piece of vacant land at 2nd Avenue and Grant Street, south of Van Buren, seemed perfect. It was across from Grant Park, a popular Latino hangout and the site of many of Post 41's events. But the lot belonged to the City of Phoenix Parks Dept. The men lobbied the city, wading through red tape for nearly a year before receiving permission from the parks department and the city commission to construct their building there.<sup>88</sup>

Post members worked with the city to iron out a lease agreement at \$1 per year for 50 years, with no property taxes. Barry Goldwater was beginning to have pull in local politics, and lent a hand in convincing the city.<sup>89</sup> Part of the agreement was the maintenance of an old adobe structure, the Darrel Duppa Building built in the 1870s on the south end of the lot. It sat derelict and unused for decades.

With the lease signed, the veterans immediately began calling on post members and the community for help. Originally they had hoped to obtain a surplus building from one of the state army camps. Frank Fuentes and Ray Martinez drove as fast as they could to purchase a structure. Marana. Coolidge. Florence. Douglas. Everywhere. Sometimes they didn't show in time, or they found the structure too inadequate for their needs.

As they frantically sought a surplus building, one member spotted articles about legionnaires cooperating to build homes for each other in the housing crunch that had yet to be solved. The idea was brought up at a Tuesday meeting and soon the surplus building hunt was dropped in favor of building their own. They began to raise funds, secure building materials and gather volunteers to help build their home.<sup>90</sup>

They broke ground on July 26, 1947. The men were often rewarded after hot, dusty days of construction with kegs of beer. The post hired only those who were necessary if a task required skills or tools that the community didn't already possess. Steadily the new building arose as more members joined in. Florencio "Lencho" Othon remembers. "I didn't get involved in it right at the very beginning, but after about two

months of going down there and seeing all the work, I got involved in it, too.”<sup>91</sup>

Through the summer months and into the winter, the men pushed on. Often they held post meetings on the construction site, “under the stars, under an open sky.”<sup>92</sup> Sometimes they ran out of money. A barbecue, festival, bingo parties or dances helped to provide additional funds.<sup>93</sup>

Then, in March 1948, their new home was complete. They had spent \$10,000 for a building valued at \$60,000. The local newspaper ran a small article announcing the dedication ceremony and commended the “resolute way the post members had tackled a job for which they had only \$2,700 when they started out. All the time the post was working on this building project, it was carrying out the sponsorship of a Boy Scout troop, a Class A junior basketball team, maintaining a blood bank and backing the championship team of the Phoenix Gazette Golden Gloves state-wide boxing tournament.”<sup>94</sup>

The newspaper had announced that Ira Hayes, the famed Pima Indian who’d help raise a flag at Iwo Jima, would be on hand to raise the post’s flag. After Mass at Immaculate Heart, the community surrounded a temporary stage at the post. Pipa Fuentes presided over the two-hour ceremony, handing out 75 citations as he rattled off numerous thank-you’s to those in the community who had helped build their home.

Fuentes seemed to know every individual involved. A Mr. Cruz and Mr. Dominguez had laid block, half of which was donated by Thomas Brothers Superlite Block Manufacturers. A Mr. Chavez and Mr. Johnson had pitched in as carpenters. Ted Olea put down the plumbing, with parts donated by John H. Welch Plumbing.

No four-star generals were present. The color guard marched the flags in precision. The crowd watched as post members grabbed a rope and raised the building’s first flag. People laughed at rough jokes and smiled in the achievement. There had been no waiting for help. They had done it; built their own home.<sup>95</sup>

Years later, Barry Goldwater reminisced about the dedication ceremony for the humble building.

“Judged through sophisticated eyes of most of my friends, the building would have provoked no great admiration. But those of us present actually relived the loving construction block by block and timber by timber, for this building, built in an area of our city which the federal planners would call underprivileged, was constructed not of concrete and mortar but of love and devotion and determination.”

The March 14 dedication booklet that was printed for the ceremony includes a quote, which now adorns the side of the building:

“Ever since it can be remembered, Americans of Spanish speaking ancestry have striven to promote the welfare of our country to uphold and defend its constitution and to fight for it proudly in time of war. It is not intended to drop the battle of justice, freedom and democracy merely because the sound of gunfire has stilled.”

At its completion the building was the result of more than \$50,000 invested. And it had been built just in time. Soon after the post became

a gathering point for the community. It was a venue for regular dances, wedding receptions, Boy Scout meetings and activist meetings – community functions that continue to the present day.<sup>97</sup>

Within three years the post's membership roll would grow to 900, and two more additions would grace the post.

## Community action and the better halves

On Dec. 19, 1947, the post held a meeting. Members were surrounded by mothers, sisters and wives. Ray Martinez and Frank Fuentes proposed the formation of a women's auxiliary to Post 41. The vote was unanimous.

That night, 30 women joined.

Anita Lewis, just 23 years old, was elected the first president. The women's auxiliary from the Luke-Greenway post helped them organize and soon the Post 41 group was self-sufficient.

The women planned whatever the men neglected to give attention to. They organized dances and holiday events. Some cooked meals for the meetings or community events. Others decorated the hall or chaperoned events. One member, Bertha Enriquez, volunteered as a chaperone for Grant Park's Campfire Girls. Other auxiliary members drove girls to softball games.<sup>98</sup>

Post member Tony Valenzuela remembers how Pipa and the auxiliary members made construction of their building bearable. "We'd all work to maybe 2 o'clock, and then the auxiliary would feed us. They would do the cooking. And then Frank Fuentes would open up a great big tub of cold beer and we'd have a ball. You know, that was great! Especially on weekends. The auxiliary's always been good and we never give them credit."<sup>99</sup>

But the auxiliary's contributions would grow to be much more than simply day-to-day activities. They often took to the streets, much like the CSO in Los Angeles, gathering signatures from the community for election issues and bonds during the day while the men worked. In the evening the men would assume those duties.

The post also gave support during the more difficult moments of community life. It was not uncommon for Ray Martinez to get a phone call from Frank Fuentes that somebody needed to come down to the Post; Ira Hayes had come into town again, drowning his demons in alcohol. Ray would

Dedication booklet showing the original Post 41 of 1948. In 1949 there would be a new addition. The Ronda Room was added in 1957. And another addition would come after that.



drive Ira back home to the reservation in Sacaton.

Melancholy touched them all in April 1949, soon after they had built their new home. Raymond N. Moraga finally came home. He had died on a flight mission over Normandy four days after D-Day. It had taken four years for his family to bring him home from Europe. Post 41 was on hand for the funeral ceremonies that Saturday morning.<sup>100</sup>

Honoring the dead was not the only heartbreak for Post 41. Newborn babies did not receive the care they needed. Mothers could not get the education they needed to be good mothers, nor find easy resources to care for their children.

Father Emmett McLoughlin had done immense good for South Phoenix. He fought for the Mexican American and African American communities when nobody else seemed to care. One of his lasting efforts would be the creation of a maternity clinic in an old barber shop in 1943. The clinic would grow into the St. Monica Hospital, later renamed Memorial Hospital. But, in the clinic's earliest days, it was not enough.

The year 1949 was difficult. Several babies in the barrios had died. Families pleaded for help.

To battle the health-care deficiency in Latino communities, Post 41 took action. With funds raised at a Friday night benefit dance on Dec. 1, 1949, Post 41 swiftly organized a health clinic to help new mothers. On Dec. 6 the Well-Baby Clinic opened in an old army barracks building next to the post. It was immediately filled with 120 babies and their worried mothers.

Lencho Othon remembers the short lifespan of the clinic. "We had some nurses that volunteered their time, on the weekends especially. Doctors, same way, they would come over on the weekends, work with the nurses here. And then if I remember right, we had one girl that would be here most of the week for working mothers that would come over ... with their younger kids."<sup>101</sup>

The clinic would remain open until 1950, when services improved and were more available. But before the clinic doors closed, the national office of the legion sent a doctor to Phoenix to issue a citation to Post 41 for its outstanding contribution in improved services to children's health.<sup>102</sup>

## Opening our own eyes

**A**nother of Post 41's goals was to raise national attention to the local issues of the Salt River Valley.

As the post was being built in 1947, another organization was coming to life in Los Angeles. The Community Service Organization (CSO) was founded by Antonio Rios, Edward R. Roybal and Fred Ross Sr. to combat community issues, ranging from education to police abuse and discrimination. The CSO would train some of the iconic leaders of the Chicano movement who would rise to prominence throughout the 1960s and 1970s – César Chávez, Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla.

Within two years of its start, the CSO was succeeding in voter registration drives throughout Los Angeles. In 1949, its effort produced 15,000 new voters – most of whom helped elect CSO co-founder Edward Roybal, as Los Angeles'

first Hispanic city council member in 65 years. They were soon expanding their efforts throughout the Southwestern U.S.

Lito Peña remembers Post 41 lending barracks to the CSO in hopes of finding the same success in Phoenix. “We had an organization that we were trying to build up voting strength in the Chicano community. And I wrote a letter to one outfit and they wrote back to me and said, ‘Write to Fred Ross.’ And oh, there was another fellow, Saul Alinsky. Said, ‘Write to Saul Alinsky and tell him what your problem is.’ And so I did. And in a few days, Fred Ross came by, talked and I took him on a tour through the schools. And that’s how we got involved with CSO.”

As a CSO worker, Peña fought to improve unsanitary conditions in the barrios by having more frequent trash pickups, cleaning up alleys and covering exposed city sewers.

Whenever a political issue was deemed important to Post 41, members would appear at government meetings and fill the rooms. If necessary, they mobilized their community. One such example was a 1948 attempt to allocate some of the local levy taxes to improve several schools attended by Mexican American children.

The voter registration experiences of the CSO in Los Angeles and LULAC Ladies Councils in El Paso showed what was possible. Following their example, the members of Post 41 took to the streets when the city council told them that a bond issue vote was necessary to authorize use of the funds for these schools.

The Post 41 Women’s Auxiliary canvassed during the day, while their husbands worked, and the men helped during the evening. When their first attempt failed, they tried again. Within a year, the bond issue was passed and their schools received facility upgrades.

In the late 1940s, another bond issue was up for vote on providing improvement funds to Grant, Central and Harmon parks in South Phoenix. Again the women’s auxiliary took to the streets and residents voted to appropriate \$365,000 for the parks.<sup>103</sup>

Dedication  
ceremony of  
Post 41, 1948



Faces of Post 41

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