

# More than a Fiesta:

## Ethnic Identity, Cultural Politics, and Cinco de Mayo Festivals in Corona, California, 1930–1950

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article examines the cultural politics of Cinco de Mayo festivals in Corona, California from 1930 to 1950. In the context of strict racial segregation and limited economic opportunities that characterized this agricultural-industrial town in Southern California's Inland Empire, Mexican American organizers used Cinco de Mayo to promote ethnic solidarity and defend the ethnic Mexican community against racist and nativist attacks. Eventually, I argue, Mexican Americans used Cinco de Mayo festivals as an instrument of political opposition, by using their bicultural skills and appropriating the cultural pluralist discourse of event sponsors to gain access to community resources and demand full participation in American mainstream institutions.*

“Cinco de Mayo is not just a fiesta anymore, the gringos have taken it on as a good sales pitch. Back then we used the fiesta to accomplish something and made it work for *la raza*,” remarked Frances Martínez during a personal interview in 1999. As a longtime Corona resident and former organizer of the city’s Cinco de Mayo celebration during the 1930s and 1940s, Martínez recalled how Mexican Americans seized upon Cinco de Mayo to further the interests of the ethnic Mexican community. Martínez’s comments also remind us how Cinco de Mayo has become a marketing opportunity for corporate America—from the onslaught of sexist television beer commercials to the all-you-can-drink happy-hour promotions. This incessant hyper-commercialization of Cinco de Mayo prompted comedian Paul Rodríguez to jokingly ask *Los Angeles Times* readers, “Aren’t You Just Sicko de Mayo?” (5 May 1998). Rather than simply bemoan how corporate America has changed the meaning of Cinco de Mayo from a



Fig. 1. El Jarabe Tapatio dancer in China Poblana dress, circa 1930s. Photograph courtesy of Corona Public Library, donated by Frances Martinez.

symbol of anti-imperialist struggle and community self-determination to a drinking holiday, we should also look to the past to examine the changing uses and meanings of Cinco de Mayo for ethnic Mexican communities and American culture in general.

Although Cinco de Mayo is recognized as a national holiday in Mexico, celebrations there are limited to the Puebla and Mexico City areas; this contrasts to the festival's rising popularity throughout the United States. One recent study found approximately

122 Cinco de Mayo festivals in the United States, a majority of them located in the Southwest (Carlson 1998). In these areas, the holiday is a celebration of Mexican culture—food, music, and dance unique to Mexico—with women wearing traditional China Poblana dresses (see fig. 1). Given the increasing popularity of Cinco de Mayo it is surprising to find so few scholarly studies of this important ethnic festival. Cultural anthropologists and folklorists have done much to aid our understanding of Latino festivals, both religious and secular, but scholarship on *fiestas patrias* (patriotic festivals) remains scarce (MacGregor-Villareal 1980; Cadaval 1985; Nájera-Ramírez 1993; Flores 1995). Anthropologist Margarita Melville (1978) noted some time ago how Diez y Seis de Septiembre celebrations (marking 16 September, Mexican Independence Day) evoked sentiments of ethnic pride and solidarity among Mexican Americans. More recent studies by folklorist Laurie Kay Sommers (1985, 1991) show how Latin American immigrant groups in San Francisco's Mission District have used Cinco de Mayo to construct a pan-ethnic Latino identity. Another excellent study by historian Mary Kay Vaughn (1994) shows how Mexican villagers negotiated patriotic festivals with revolutionary state officials to redefine identities and mobilize individuals for local community initiatives. These important studies affirm

the importance of examining patriotic festivals not as frivolous playful celebrations marked by music, eating, dancing, and drama, but as highly contested events characterized by both affirmation and resistance to the established order (Miliband 1977).

Using oral histories, newspapers, and archival materials, I examined the cultural politics of Cinco de Mayo festivals in Corona, California from 1930 to 1950. In the face of the racial discrimination and limited economic opportunities that characterized Corona, an agricultural-industrial town in Southern California's Inland Empire, ethnic Mexican organizers used Cinco de Mayo to promote ethnic consciousness, build community solidarity, and defend the community against racist and nativist attacks. Over the span of two decades, I found, American-born youth of Mexican immigrant parents transformed Cinco de Mayo from a strictly patriotic celebration extolling the virtues of Mexican nationalism to a bicultural event that expressed their newfound Mexican American identity. This process of cultural change and the construction of ethnic identity, however, was not without conflict and struggle (Fischer 1985). The festival's predominantly Mexican American male leadership encountered tensions with Mexican nationalist groups and female organizers reflecting larger generational, racial, class, and gender divisions within the community. Apart from these pressures, Mexican American fiesta organizers faced new challenges in the postwar years. Anglo city officials and Mexican government representatives were intent on using Cinco de Mayo celebrations to promote "goodwill" in intercultural and inter-American relations as part of the Good Neighbor policy; citrus companies sought to advertise their fruit products, sponsor queen candidates, and transform the patriotic event into a commercial affair. I argue that Mexican Americans used Cinco de Mayo festivals not only to promote ethnic solidarity but as an instrument of political opposition, by using their bicultural skills and appropriating the cultural pluralist discourse of event sponsors to seek community resources and demand full participation in the American body politic. Corona's Mexican Americans seized upon what Mary Kay Vaughn (1994) has termed the "interactive spaces" of patriotic festivals to redefine identities and redirect energies toward community-building projects, and most of all, to demonstrate to the ethnic Mexican and Anglo communities that Mexican Americans had indeed become a political force to be reckoned with. Despite some political gains, however, the festival failed to improve postwar economic conditions for the entire Mexican community.

## The Early Fiesta: A Celebration of Mexicanidad

Cinco de Mayo became a major holiday on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border following the victory of the poorly equipped Mexican troops led by General Ignacio Zaragoza over the better-armed French invaders in the famous battle of Puebla on 5 May 1862. News of the impending victory spread throughout Mexican communities in the U.S. Southwest, prompting supporters to send money and supplies to aid the Mexican army. Mexican women in particular lent their moral support by publishing patriotic poems in San Francisco's Spanish-language newspaper *El Nuevo Mundo* (Cabello-Argandoña 1993). After Mexico reestablished its independence in 1867, Cinco de Mayo became a significant event for Mexican communities in the late-nineteenth-century Southwest (Camarillo 1979; De León 1982). On the fifth of May Mexican residents reclaimed the streets to watch parade floats adorned with Mexican banners, and in their favorite festival attire strolled the grounds in search of familiar faces, delicious food, lively entertainment, and patriotic speeches. On 5 May 1894, for example, the Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper, *Las Dos Republicas*, printed its front page in red, white, and green to express Mexican national pride (Griswold de Castillo 1979). The combination of print and public performance during these festive occasions encouraged expatriates to express their patriotic loyalty to the country they had left behind and create an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Cinco de Mayo provided an important cultural space for many Mexican immigrants who faced an alienating environment with restricted job opportunities and racial segregation. To escape wretched poverty and political upheaval, thousands of Mexican immigrants had left their families and pueblos behind in search of work in the expanding manufacturing and agricultural industries of the United States. Upon finding steady employment, immigrants and their families settled down in visibly segregated barrios and *colonias* on the margins of Southern California's cities and suburbs. One of the suburbs that attracted a large Mexican population was the city of Corona, located approximately fifty-two miles southeast of Los Angeles, in western Riverside County.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the diversified economies of larger cities, Corona's economy depended upon a single agricultural product—lemons (Marsh 1998). Corona's lemon industry exercised undue influence in city government, schools, churches, and public spaces, making Mexican residents relatively dependent on a small but powerful Anglo grower elite. Within the city's circular design, Sixth

Street was considered the racial borderline that divided Mexican Northside and white Southside (Alamillo 2000). In fact, the only time ethnic Mexican residents crossed Sixth Street and entered the white side of town was during the Cinco de Mayo parade (see fig. 2).

During the early 1920s the chief organizer of Corona's Cinco de Mayo was El Comité Patriótica, made up of representatives from mutual aid societies (*mutualistas*), Masonic or fraternal lodges, social clubs, and other voluntary associations (Pichardo 1992).<sup>2</sup> Every year on 5 May, regardless of the day of the week, Comité officials organized a daylong civic program. The coronation of the festival queen by the Mexican consul and a morning parade would be followed by patriotic speeches, cultural performances of traditional songs, and folkloric dances, concluding with an all-night street dance. By the mid-1920s the Mexican consular office began to work more closely with event organizers as part of the Mexican government's ambitious efforts to promote "Mexicanization" through Spanish-language schools, libraries, print media, and cultural events (Balderrama 1982; Sánchez 1993; González 1999).

Beginning in 1921 Mexican consular offices throughout the United States were instructed by President Obregón to organize Comisiones



Fig. 2. Cinco de Mayo parade on Sixth Street, circa 1920s. Photograph courtesy of Corona Public Library, donated by Frances Martinez.

Honoríficas Mexicanas (Mexican Honorary Commissions) within their designated districts. According to *La Opinión* of 13 May 1927, the political purpose of these organizations was to “maintain alive and constant the memory and love of Mexico ... remind Mexicans of their duty to the Fatherland ... [and] serve as a connector between Mexicans in each of the small localities and the consulate.” While in some cases Mexican consuls offered protection to the expatriate community, they also pursued a hidden geopolitical agenda. As historians George Sánchez (1993) and Gilbert González (1999) have convincingly argued, Mexican consuls sponsored patriotic celebrations as part of a larger campaign to convince emigrants to return to their homeland and help modernize the Mexican nation with their newfound skills and acquired savings. Efforts to inculcate narrowly defined nationalist identities among the expatriate population, however, were rarely successful and sometimes had unexpected results.

In 1926 the consul-sponsored Comisión Honorífica Mexicana replaced El Comité Patriótica as the principal organizer of Corona’s Cinco de Mayo festivities. The Comisión president, a prominent local Mexican businessman named Julio Cruz, worked closely with Mexican officials from the San Bernardino consulate to organize Cinco de Mayo festivities.<sup>3</sup> Before a packed audience at the 1926 ceremonies, Los Angeles consul F. Alfonso Pesqueira delivered a rousing speech on the stubborn rebels who had ousted French invaders from Mexican soil. As reported in the *Corona Independent* (hereafter *C.I.*), the consul was abruptly interrupted by an audience member who complained about the nativist attacks and racial segregation in public schools, and about “for the white race only” signs at the municipal swimming pool. Consul Pesqueira responded by offering “consular protection” and reminded the audience “to observe the local and community laws, being careful to keep themselves at all times above suspicion while living in an American community.” Pesqueira emphasized “good citizenship during [Cinco de Mayo] as particularly necessary among the laboring classes because when not in their own country all infractions of the law will bring increased harm on the mother country” (*C.I.* 5 May 1926). While downplaying the city’s racial tensions, the consul’s message emphasized individual responsibility and festival discipline, and, most of all, the need to convey a positive image of the ethnic Mexican community and Mexican nation to the local Anglo population. The responsibility of presenting a positive community image to the larger American society fell upon immigrant leaders and an emerging second generation.

In 1929 the stock market crash propelled Southern California and other parts of the world into economic turmoil. Instead of blaming erratic fluctuations of the global economy, politicians, reformers, and white citizens pointed fingers at the “Mexican problem,” blaming Mexicans for the scarcity of jobs and overburdened relief rolls. In Corona, white residents presented a racist petition to the chamber of commerce and the city council demanding job preferences for white citizens. The petition stated: “Owing to the conditions in which many of the citizens of the white race of Corona are in, many being in need of assistance. We, the undersigned, ask that laborers of the white race be given the preference in order that they may live and also stimulate the business of the community” (*C.I.* 15 January 1932). This racially charged climate, combined with deportation and repatriation campaigns during the Great Depression, convinced festival organizers to cancel Cinco de Mayo celebrations. They remained suspended until a new generation of young leaders stepped in to revive the fiesta in the mid-1930s.

### Emergence of a “Bicultural” Festival

These children of Mexican immigrants, born or raised in the United States, identified less with Mexican nationalism and gravitated instead toward certain aspects of American culture (García 1989; Sánchez 1993). In terms of political strategy, this so-called Mexican American generation believed in defending the community against resurgent racist and nativist attacks by emphasizing their Americanism and forging relations with white Americans. The first attempt to bridge the cultural gap came during the city’s fiftieth anniversary in 1936. Mexican Americans participated in the five-day jubilee celebration by organizing events for the last day, which fell on the fifth of May. This widely publicized event attracted residents from all over Southern California, including a *Los Angeles Times* reporter who observed, “Many prominent figures in Mexican circles of Southern California spoke on the [Cinco de Mayo] program which was replete with readings, music, marching bodies, [sic] and a hundred decorated automobiles in the parade” (6 May 1936). That same afternoon more than 5,000 spectators packed the city park to watch the Mexican American baseball team, the Corona Athletics, square off against the Anaheim Merchants.<sup>4</sup> Along with traditional Mexican dances such as Jarabe Tapatio and Chiapanecas, festival organizers added the Jitterbug Dance contest to the lineup with jazz and swing music performed by a local Mexican American band,



Fig. 3. *The Highlights*, a local Mexican America band that played during Cinco de Mayo, 1939. Photograph courtesy of Corona Public Library, donated by Frances Martinez.

The Highlights (see fig. 3). The band and dance contest attracted a large young crowd “who were all on their best behavior” (*C.I.* 6 May 1936). One Mexican American committee member expressed his gratitude to the city mayor and Anglo civic groups for their participation. “Without their assistance we could not have presented such a contribution to our city’s anniversary celebration ... We trust that our [Mexican] people’s efforts have left a memory of a splendid conclusion to the city’s jubilee” (*C.I.* 6 May 1936). These statements revealed the attempt by Mexican American festival organizers to convey a positive image of the ethnic Mexican community with the aim of improving race relations with white Coronans.

Other public indications of the emerging biculturalism of Cinco de Mayo were the changing parade floats and routes. During the 1920s parade floats had been decorated with strictly Mexican expressive forms and nationalist symbols intended to elicit nostalgia and patriotic fervor for *la madre patria*. The 1929 float, for example, was titled “La Patria”; it featured a woman dressed in a white, green, and red costume and carrying the scales of justice, liberty and equality (*C.I.* 5 May 1929). A decade later an American flag and a Mexican flag were hoisted together on the same parade



float, which featured an Uncle Sam figure next to a Mexican musical band (*C.I.* 5 May 1939). Another important change was the extension of the parade route from the Mexican Northside into white Southside. The *Corona Independent* described the scene as the parade crossed Sixth Street into Southside's main business district:

This morning a colorful parade headed by the local Mexican band paraded the downtown streets, stopping at the city hall where tribute was paid to the American and Mexican flags ... the Mexican band, which is one of the best musical organizations in this section, played the "Star Spangled Banner" and the Mexican national anthem as the hundreds of people of the parade and spectators stood with heads uncovered. (5 May 1939)

The 1939 festival organizers chose to highlight the cooperation between Anglos and Mexicans, and between the two countries, in their desire to improve race relations. One Anglo city official was convinced that "The 1939 fiesta is proof that Coronans can work together harmoniously and produce a worthwhile event" (*C.I.* 4 May 1939). These Cinco de Mayo parades can be viewed as political rituals in which marchers and spectators intruded upon and reclaimed segregated public spaces to dramatize their community strength. As Susan Davis has pointed out, "street performances ... are both shaped by the field of power relations in which they take place, and are attempts to act on and influence those relations" (1986, 5–6). Because of their ability to disrupt strict racial codes and economic divisions, Cinco de Mayo parades were more than mere cultural expressions, but symbolic political acts demanding full participation by ethnic Mexicans in the political, economic, and social structure of the city. The ideals of unity and solidarity publicly expressed in these parades, however, covered up underlying tensions and divisions within the community.

The incorporation of American popular culture into Cinco de Mayo programming distressed some older Mexican immigrants who felt traditional public rituals were being threatened (Monroy 1990; Ruiz 1990). Jess Uribe remembered how, when he was a young participant in the fiesta, "There was a lot of marching and speeches about the glory of Mexico. It was kind of dull for the younger crowds, especially for those that didn't speak good Spanish, so many of us waited for the dances instead" (1999). These intergenerational conflicts were first observed by a researcher who reasoned, "It is natural that the transplanted festivals should change with their new environment ... To the young people, these affairs offer only an

opportunity to dance and make merry” (Lanigan 1932, 30–31). Similarly, anthropologist Manuel Gamio retells the story of Juan Ruiz, who disapproved of his sixteen-year-old daughter’s changing musical tastes: “American jazz music is all that is to be heard in this house. Juan doesn’t like it when that is played and is always promising to get Mexican pieces. He celebrates the 16th of September and takes an active part in the Mexican national festivals and attends all kinds of Mexican lectures” (Gamio 1931, 111). These intergenerational conflicts also stemmed from competing nationalist ideologies: a conservative romantic nationalism (*México lindo*) and a bicultural Mexican Americanism (Rosales 1987; Treviño 1991).

By the early 1940s the long-standing conflicts over the fiesta’s cultural orientation and political purpose grew more complex and tense, a trend that continued into the postwar years.<sup>5</sup> As Mexican American leaders became more active in all aspects of festival planning, the older immigrant leaders associated with the Comisiones Honoríficas refused to relinquish complete control. As mentioned earlier, the Comisiones Honoríficas, consisting of leaders of the Mexican expatriate community and the Mexican consul representative, dedicated themselves to organizing Cinco de Mayo activities, among other delegated duties. The leading Mexican American organization vying for control of fiesta activities in Corona was Los Amigos Club. Organized in 1943 by a small group of Mexican American men and women, Los Amigos’s chief aim was “to arouse interest and educate the citizens of Mexican descent as to their rights, privileges and duties as American citizens” (*C.I.* 4 May 1961).<sup>6</sup>

By 1940, the Mexican-origin population of Corona had climbed to almost 30 percent of the total city population (2,324 of 8,764 residents). Yet the majority still faced limited economic opportunities outside of agriculture, as well as substandard housing conditions, racially segregated schools, and lack of representation on school boards and the city council. In an attempt to remedy these problems Los Amigos conducted a voter registration drive, organized naturalization classes for immigrant adults, and advocated social change through the ballot box. Not all members of the ethnic Mexican community, however, supported these efforts. “The Comisiones got mad at [us] because [we were] registering Mexicans during the fiesta,” declared Frances Martínez, a former Los Amigos member who challenged the immigrant generation. “They said we [were] trying to make Americanos out of Mexicanos” (1999). Although fundraising, canvassing, and other promotional events had gone on during the festivities, some Comisión leaders believed it was inappropriate to convince participants to

renounce their Mexican citizenship while celebrating Mexican culture. "You see the older Mexican people still had dreams of one day returning to Mexico," explained another former Los Amigos member, Reynaldo Aparicio, "so they held on tight to these [Mexican] traditions" (1999). Intra-ethnic conflicts were not uncommon during this period. In *American Me*, Beatrice Griffith tells of one Mexican American who complained that "The consul and [Comisiones] Honoríficas are all right, but for me they have no foundation. I'm an American citizen. Somehow the answer to our problems has to be found by us and the Americans ... not the Mexicanistas" (1948, 239). For many Mexican Americans who emphasized both their Mexican heritage and their American citizenship, however, cultural adaptation was neither contradictory nor a mutually exclusive process; rather, according to historian George Sánchez (1993), it was a complex and ambiguous process contingent on historical circumstances.

Because the Comisiones functioned under the supervision and control of the local consular office, Los Amigos members turned to the Mexican consul in San Bernardino in an attempt to resolve the dispute. As the representative of Mexican American organizations, Martínez argued that the Comisión was hindering the political development of Corona's Mexican American community (1999). Serving as an intermediary for the quarreling groups, the consul organized a community meeting. And to the surprise of many, including Martínez, the consul sided with Los Amigos. As Martínez explained, "The consul told them [Comisiones] that they were guests here and if they wanted to separate themselves, they should go back to Mexico, where they need [politically] active people. But for those [Mexican Americans] who are citizens they have a duty to exercise their rights." While recognizing the important role of the Comisión in the fiesta, the consul praised the bicultural skills of the Mexican Americans and suggested that they had the most potential for harmonizing race relations in town and improving conditions for all ethnic Mexicans.

### Changing Roles for Women

Despite the increased involvement of Mexican Americans in the fiesta planning committee during from the mid-1930s onward, another aspect of the festival had not changed: the leadership remained exclusively male. An identifiable gender division of labor existed during the festival planning, in which men dominated the programming, financing, and public speaking events while women predominated in food preparation, event



Fig. 4. Frances Martínez playing the piano during a dance recital, 1946. Photograph courtesy of Corona Public Library, donated by Frances Martínez.

decoration, queen contest, and dance contests. Indeed, all aspects of the day's festivities were highly dependent on women's unpaid labor, from the decoration of parade floats to working the food booths to organizing dance contests (see fig. 4). One Mexican American woman complained that, "It used to be more women who helped to decorate floats than men. All my [female] friends and neighbors would come over the night before the parade. We'd spend almost all night working on the float" (Rodríguez 1998). The one public domain in which Mexican American women exerted some degree of control and attained social status within the community was the Cinco de Mayo queen contest.

Becoming a fiesta queen was a complex process in which participants faced strict gender ideologies carefully weighted against economic realities and parental authority. Corona's 1923 Cinco de Mayo queen, Teresa Lemus, remembered how young Mexican American women, ranging from sixteen to twenty years old, were expected to sell tickets around the community; the one who sold the most ticket-votes earned the coveted queen title. Lemus was first encouraged by her mother to enter the queen contest even though she was reluctant because of the amount of work involved. Selling tickets at

ten cents each and convincing large working families to purchase a ticket was not easy. Lemus recalled during a newspaper interview that "Collecting funds to hold a fiesta-dance was difficult because most people were poor [but] believe it or not we raised one hundred [dollars]" (*C.I.* 4 May 1986). After she was selected as the winner, the Mexican consul crowned Lemus during a widely publicized coronation ceremony. In the parade the next morning she wore a white georgette gown with a train of red velvet trimmed with white fur and rode on the queen's float, decorated with classic white pillars topped by the Mexican eagle and decorated in the Mexican national colors of red, white and green (*C.I.* 5 May 1923).

Within the patriarchal household young girls who aspired to become queen exerted some degree of control by lobbying older female members of their families. The case of Emily Delgadillo illustrates this point. Delgadillo was initially denied entry into the queen contest by her father, who refused to permit her to walk the streets selling tickets. Feeling frustrated, she recruited her grandmother to convince the father to change his mind. Finally he relented and decided to allow her to enter the queen contest on the condition that her sisters, mother, and grandmother chaperone her everywhere, especially when walking the streets (Delgadillo 2000). The chaperone phenomenon was not uncommon in Mexican American communities. As historian Vicki Ruiz (1998) has pointed out, Mexican American queen contestants were carefully chaperoned by their parents but that did not stop them from resisting parental authority by reclaiming public spaces for meeting friends and potential suitors.

Mexican American women's increased involvement in festival planning committees during the 1940s coincided with their entry into canneries, factories, and packinghouses to fill labor shortages during World War II (Ruiz 1987). Mexican American women earning their own wages began to make informed choices about how to spend their money for leisure activities and shopping. But working on a seasonal basis and earning meager piece-rate wages limited their ability to subsidize their own candidacy (since they had to purchase their own dresses and so on). For this reason, queen candidates needed to solicit a business sponsor. One of the main sponsors of queen candidates was Doña María Ortíz, owner of Chapala Cafe, a popular restaurant-bar frequented by single men and Mexican braceros. Like the famous Santa Fe business owner Doña María Gertrudis Barceló, Doña María Ortíz defied strict gender roles as a businesswoman and gained some political clout within the community (González 1990). Ortíz used her influence on male customers to determine the queen contest winner. At the

1945 contest, for example, former queen Gloria Granado (2000) visited Chapala Café to increase her chances of winning. She recalled:

My grandmother took me to go visit the Chapala [Café] to audition in front of Doña Ortíz. She looked me over and stared at me. I kind of felt awkward standing in the middle of the café ... She said something about liking my face and [light] skin color. Then she told me not to worry about it [queen contest] because she would make sure that I'd win.

Doña Ortíz convinced Mexican nationals to purchase 400 tickets from Granado during the last fifteen minutes of voting, bringing Granado's total earnings to \$1,100 and giving her the Cinco de Mayo crown.

The politics of Cinco de Mayo queen contests also revealed the larger racial and class divisions within the ethnic Mexican community. Queen contestants with European or Spanish-like features were typically preferred over dark-skinned Indian and mestiza candidates (Horton 2000; Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996) Because of white skin privilege, Granado's long-standing friendship with a darker-skinned queen contestant became strained. She explained: "I attended school together with



Fig. 5. Cinco de Mayo queen of 1946. Photograph courtesy of Corona Public Library, donated by Margaret Muñoz Rosales.

the other contestant but because she got jealous when I won, she would not talk to me afterwards especially when the organizers took us all together to buy our dresses in Los Angeles. It was an uncomfortable drive" (Granado 2000). Fiesta participants also expressed their racial and class preferences by buying ticket-votes. For example, former queen Margaret Muñoz proudly declared during an interview in 2000 that she became the first queen from the Foothill Ranch, an agricultural labor camp on the outskirts of Corona (see fig. 5). Her

proud smile turned to scornful dismay, however, when she talked about the disappointing comments she received from an audience member. She explained, "My mom told me what this audience person said about me. This lady made a comment about how *morenita* [dark-skinned] I was and also from *el pobre rancho* [the poor ranch]. When my mother heard her comments she got so mad that she abruptly cut her off and told her, 'Hey lady what do you think the queen of Mexico is? A white girl! No way. She is also *morenita* like my daughter'" (Muñoz 2000). In later years Chicana organizers shifted the queen contest from a beauty-like pageant toward a talent competition to build self-confidence, eschewing rivalry among female contestants. In the immediate postwar years, however, underlying racial and class divisions among contestants, participants, and audience members persisted as the fiesta became increasingly commercialized and dominated by competing groups, each vying for control over the meaning, symbols, and purpose of Cinco de Mayo.

### **Cultural Politics of the Postwar Fiesta**

In the immediate postwar years, returning Mexican American soldiers discovered that not much had changed back home. Corona's Mexican population still faced racial discrimination in the community and limited job opportunities outside the citrus industry. A reminder of the enduring racism occurred when a few Mexican American veterans were denied admission into the American Legion Post. In response they formed their own post named after Joe Dominguez, the first Mexican American from Corona to be killed during World War II.

One noticeable change, however, was the increased presence and participation of Anglo city officials at the fiestas. In their desire to attract tourist dollars, city officials sponsored a publicity campaign to entice Southern Californians to attend Corona's Cinco de Mayo fiesta. One newspaper advertisement read: "Corona will don festival attire in preparation for the coming fiesta when Corona's Mexican population lays down its citrus tools and dons fiesta regalia to celebrate Cinco de Mayo" (*C.I.* 10 April 1945). City officials invited Anglo community groups to participate by sponsoring a booth or attending main events. The city mayor reminded them that "the fact that the Mexican people make up a permanent part of Corona's population and are an integral part of the city's social and economic life is reason enough for cooperating with them" (*C.I.* 26 February 1945). The Anglo city mayor attempted to lead by



Fig. 6. The Corona city mayor crowning the Cinco de Mayo queen, 1946. Photograph courtesy of Corona Public Library, donated by Frances Martinez.

example when he participated with the consul in the crowning of the Cinco de Mayo queen (see fig. 6).

Corona city officials viewed these festive occasions as an opportunity to improve goodwill in intercultural and inter-American relations, and joined forces with the Mexican consular office to promote “much city-wide cooperation and good-neighborly feeling” (*C.I.* 26 February 1945). Invoking the spirit of the Good Neighbor policy—hailed at that time as radically shifting U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America from an aggressive interventionist approach toward promoting inter-American cooperation and goodwill—these government officials viewed Cinco de Mayo as a vehicle to pursue the policy’s liberal goals at home and abroad.<sup>6</sup> Hector Jara, vice consul of Mexico from the San Bernardino office, told the city council that “No doubt the [Cinco de Mayo] fiesta will tend to [foster] a better understanding and to strengthen the friendly relations between our two people, and I sincerely believe that the city’s Mexican population will continue to receive your help and cooperation in various future endeavors” (*C.I.* 6 May 1945).

In response to proponents of the Good Neighbor policy, Corona’s Mexican Americans appropriated this liberal pluralist discourse to make



demands upon government officials to improve postwar conditions of the ethnic Mexican community. In May 1945 Corona's Mexican American leaders attended several meetings of the Mexican Affairs Coordination Committee, a subcommittee of the Southern California Council on Inter-American Affairs. The committee's president spoke of how some "Americans are doing their best to make the [Good Neighbor policy] work" and warned that "now if any racial or religious discrimination exists within this country, the old world will accuse the Americans of not practicing what they preach" (*C.I.* 4 May 1945). A few days later, the Mexican secretary of foreign affairs, Ezequiel Padilla, spoke at the Cinco de Mayo observance in front of city hall, declaring that "Mexico's foreign policy is one of justice and mutual trust between nations [because] without trust and good faith among nations and goodwill among statesmen no permanent peace is possible" (*Los Angeles Times* 6 May 1945).

Upon their return from Los Angeles, Corona leaders decided to incorporate Pan-American themes at the 1946 fiesta. The festival planning was led by, Los Amigos Club, with help from Joe Dominguez's American Legion Post, and El Modelo Club, a youth recreation group. The club boldly outlined its main objective as follows: "The chief purpose [sic] is to improve conditions among the Mexican-Americans and Mexicans living in Corona. Believing in our American institutions and in the democratic way of life, we believe that by raising the social level of Mexican-American people and improving their living conditions we are helping to improve our community" (*C.I.* 1 May 1946). One of the most memorable symbols of Pan-Americanism, according to Alice Rodríguez, was using a mestizo Uncle Sam in the parade. Rodríguez remembered the event: "We had a dark mestizo person on the parade float and we needed somebody to represent Uncle Sam standing in front of a big globe of the world. As the parade float went by he was dressed in stars and stripes, Uncle Sam in brown face, carrying the Mexican and American flags, and people were looking and laughing" (1998). Scholar Carey McWilliams, also an activist lawyer, observed the rising political activism among Mexican Americans when he wrote, "As more and more Mexicans began to participate in Good Neighbor conferences and institutes, the discussion shifted from a probing of conditions long deplored to a consideration of ways and means by which the Mexican people themselves might be given a chance to improve these conditions" (1948, 248).

Apart from transforming the parade into a symbol of inter-American cooperation, Los Amigos Club used Cinco de Mayo events to raise funds for the building of a community recreation center to be known as La

Casita. The interest in a recreation center followed a spate of incidents in which police officers harassed zoot suiters and pachucos at a local dance. The city council responded by sentencing the falsely convicted youth to juvenile prison, passing a curfew ordinance, and denying dance permits to all community groups with the exception of the Los Amigos Club. A better solution, according to one Mexican American resident, would be to “give troubled Mexican youth proper recreation rather than [prison] correction” (*C.I.* 1 April 1946). Although the city recreation department was willing to donate the land, the community needed to raise funds for the building construction, which amounted to approximately \$10,000. At the 1946 Cinco de Mayo festival, organizers raised more than \$2,000; while this was not close to the total amount needed, Los Amigos president praised the community’s efforts, saying, “Residents of Corona should be justly proud of living in a community where the Good Neighbor policy is not only a figure of speech but an actuality ... The Mexican people are deeply grateful to each and every one who had any participation in the Cinco de Mayo that words fail us to properly thank all the Corona Good Neighbors. Let us cooperate with one another in a truly democratic city” (*C.I.* 17 May 1946). Although the building fund was far from complete, they used the available money to build a dance platform to stage fundraisers until the next year’s fiesta.

Despite framing their discourse and actions within the Good Neighbor policy Mexican American organizers were still short of funds, so they turned to the citrus companies for assistance. In a controversial move, Mexican American organizers associated with the Los Amigos Club proposed to citrus industry officials and the Corona Chamber of Commerce that the city move away from the “old Cinco de Mayo idea” toward a “Lemon Fiesta” theme “in recognition of the importance of the lemon industry in the development prosperity of Corona” (*C.I.* 18 March 1947). The proposed three-day weekend celebration called “Spring Fiesta and Lemon Festival” or “Lemon Fiesta” was not well received by some members of the ethnic Mexican community (see fig. 7). The most vocal critics were members of the Comisión Honorífica, who accused festival organizers of “selling out” and “de-Mexicanizing” Cinco de Mayo by succumbing to the hegemonic control of the local citrus industry and corporate America in general (*C.I.* 18 March 1947). Another critic sarcastically questioned what lemon-related events such as a “lemon baking contest” and “lemon box derby race” had to do with the battle of Puebla (*C.I.* 21 March 1947). Despite strong criticism by some community members, a majority of the city’s Mexican American groups—Los Amigos Club, Joe Dominguez’s

American Legion Post, and La Casita Recreation Council—decided to participate in the Lemon Fiesta.

A Joe Dominguez Post member, Ray Aparicio, explained their reasons (1999). As well as needing to raise an additional \$7,500 to build the recreation center, the groups wanted to “bring more resources to the community by improving relations with the city and getting better paying jobs in the lemon industry.” France Martínez, the former Los Amigos member, defended her group’s decision against the Comisión’s criticism by citing the lack of financial support from the Mexican consul:

In the beginning, the [Comisiones] got money from the consul to help them set up Cinco de Mayo and celebrate among themselves. We worked with the city recreation department and chamber of commerce because we did not get the same kind of help from the consul apart from attending our events, and because most people were poor and worked in agriculture they could not contribute to the recreation center, so we needed to get help from the city, [company] sponsors, and Anglos. (1999)

Martínez’s comment faults the Mexican consular office for its lack of financial assistance in organizing the festival, apart from making public diplomatic appearances and crowning the queen. At the 1947 Lemon Fiesta, the Mexican consul praised the work of Mexican American organizers in promoting closer intercultural and inter-American relations, stating: “The close and friendly relationship between Mexico and the United States is reflected in the [La Casita] Recreation project. Like Corona other cities will also be building recreational centers” (*C.I.* 5 May 1947). Despite the



Fig. 7. Lemon Fiesta program guide, 1947. Photograph courtesy of Corona Public Library.

consul's praise, however, the La Casita Recreation Council received little financial help. In the end, the Comisión finally decided to organize a separate Cinco de Mayo celebration on the fifth of May with its own slate of queen candidates, a marching band, and patriotic speeches.

Despite criticism from some sectors of the community, Lemon Fiesta organizers maintained much of the bicultural programming and added new lemon-related events that symbolized the increasing commercialization of this ethnic festival. Although they did not attain greater economic mobility within the citrus industry, Mexican Americans still raised recreation funds and gained some political leverage. The first day of the fiesta was devoted to lemon-related events organized by the Corona Chamber of Commerce, including lemon pie baking contests, a lemon box derby, free lemonade drinks, a giant lemon pie placed in front of city hall, and tours of the lemon byproducts factory advertised as the "world's only lemon by-products plant."<sup>7</sup> On the second day, Mexican American groups led Mexican cultural activities, including many of the traditional events featured in previous celebrations: the morning parade, the queen contest, a baseball tournament, and Mexican expressive forms such as mariachis, *charros*, and *ballet folklórico*. On the final day both groups worked together to organize a big dance at the future site of La Casita. In a bilingual pamphlet distributed to all attendees, organizers clearly outlined the fiesta's mission: "The [Lemon Fiesta] will again make La Casita Recreation Center the recipient of its efforts. This is done in the hope that an appreciable advance may be made in the immediate usability of this project. In future years it is anticipated that other interests of the community will receive the yearly Fiesta offering" (Lemon Fiesta 1947, 2). Another important addition to the program was a special recognition of Mexican women's role during the battle of Puebla, including that of Doña Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez, who risked her life to warn the Mexican army that a trap was being set by French troops, thus enabling them to prepare for the decisive battle.

As mentioned earlier, the queen contest evolved from a marginal event in the 1920s to one of the most popular events in the late 1930s and early 1940s. However, by the postwar years queen candidates found themselves seeking corporate sponsors to pay for their dresses, crowning ceremony, and parade floats. One of the biggest employers of Mexican American women, the Harvill Company, sponsored only their own female employees who entered the contest. The 1947 queen contestant, a Harvill employee named Emily Delgadillo, posed for several photos inside her workplace. Several months before the fifth of May these photos were

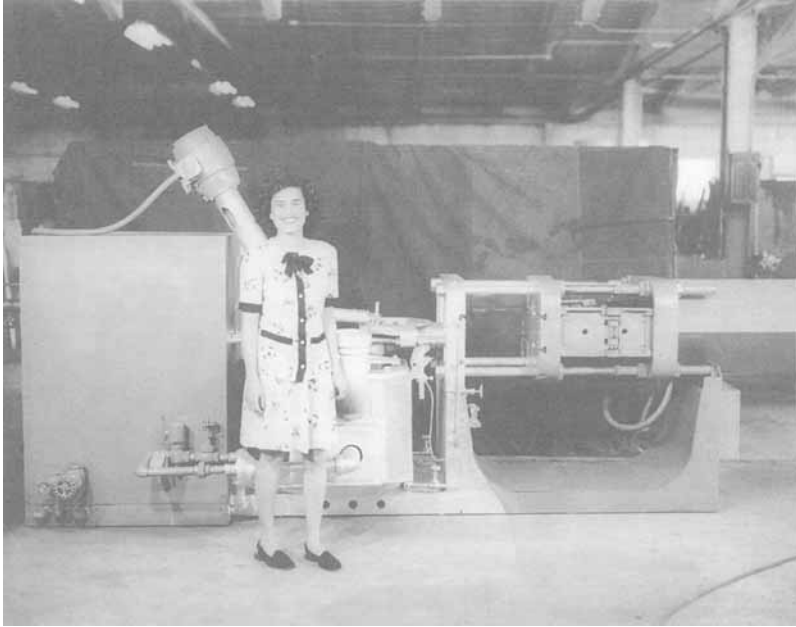


Fig. 8. Lemon Fiesta queen candidate inside Harvill Company's plant, 1947. Photograph courtesy of Corona Library, donated by Emily Delgadillo Ramirez.

featured in the *Corona Independent* for publicity and advertising purposes (see fig. 8). One of the photos was published with the following caption: "During and after the war many beautiful girls contributed greatly to the [operation of [lemon] die-casting machines" (*Corona Independent* 21 April 1947). The photo featured a Rosita the Riveter–like image that stressed loyalty and obedience to the company and the American nation, and the industriousness of Mexican American women, while ignoring their low wages and subordinated racial and gender position within and outside the workplace (Santillán 1989; Gluck 1987). The corporate sponsorship of queen candidates threatened the masculine and "breadwinner" role of some Mexican American men, who believed that queen candidates should solicit votes solely from individuals, groups, and small businesses. One Comisión member complained that "The small [Mexican-owned] businesses were not being asked to be sponsors because the companies have gotten too involved with the [Cinco de Mayo] queens" (Lopez 2000). For Mexican American queen candidates, however, a corporate sponsor meant less time and energy spent selling ticket-votes door to door, and they could potentially use their public role to negotiate better working conditions



Fig. 9. Lemon Fiesta queen parade float on Main Street, 1947. Photograph courtesy of Corona Library, donated by Emily Delgadillo Ramirez.

and higher pay. Such was the case with peasant women near Puebla, Mexico, whose involvement in patriotic festivals, according to Mary Kay Vaughn (1994), made them “more active and more public.”

Another significant change during the 1947 Lemon Fiesta was the introduction of a new parade route. The new route began in front of city hall (located in the white Southside of town) and moved northward, passing the main commercial streets and company packinghouses and finally arriving at the proposed site for the new recreation center, located in the center of the Northside Mexican community. The main parade float featured the queen, her nephew and niece, and her court surrounded by tree branches with lemons (see fig. 9). This public procession acted as a “political ritual” dramatizing the community solidarity behind this worthwhile cause, as well as taking on symbolic importance as Mexican American participants passed by the centers of power—a reminder of whose labor power had been used to build the city (Marston 1989). In assessing the success of the Lemon Fiesta it is important to consider the ways in which cultural practices and symbols have the capacity of resisting and accommodating to politico-economic structures of power. As George Lipsitz reminds us, “Cultural forms create conditions of possibility, they expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future; but they also engender accommodation with prevailing power realities” (1990, 16).

Despite widespread support for the recreation center, the 1947 Lemon Fiesta only raised \$1,953, and the following year the amount decreased to

\$486 (C.I. 10 May 1948). The declining amounts raised revealed the limitations of the Lemon Fiesta: although the event drew support from the Anglo community and citrus industry, this kind of support did not always translate into significant political and economic gains for the entire ethnic Mexican community. By 1949 La Casita Recreation Center Council still needed more than \$7000 for the center's completion. To raise the remaining amount, Mexican Americans lobbied city council members for support and reminded them that Mexican Americans' rising political clout would be a factor in future elections. In a newspaper editorial, Frances Martínez complained to city council members that "It will take twenty years of holding fiestas to get the money needed to finish the La Casita building ... The Mexican people are willing to help. They need a place where the children can meet and it should be a public[ly funded] enterprise" (C.I. 13 April 1949). After intense political pressure from members of Los Amigos Club, the city council allocated the remaining funds in December 1949 and completed the construction of La Casita.

Apart from acquiring recreational space for the community, these fiesta celebrations enabled Mexican Americans to sharpen their leadership and organizing skills as well as establish networks of support that proved invaluable for future civil rights struggles. During the opening ceremonies of La Casita recreation center, one city official praised "those [Mexican Americans] who not only made a fine new recreation center possible, but have cemented lasting friendships among two races who reside side by side within Corona" (C.I. 26 September 1949). Using these new friendships and social networks to their advantage, Corona's Mexican Americans continued to press for social change and civil rights. Successes included the desegregation of public schools, recreation facilities, and public spaces, the building of low-income public housing, and the election of the first Mexican American to the Corona City Council. Similarly, in postwar Los Angeles, progressive Mexican American union activists used the Mexican Independence Day fiesta to conduct a range of social, cultural, and political activities to win over "the allegiance of an increasingly politicized Mexican-American community" (Burt 1996, 6) Similar struggles were taking place elsewhere. As historian David Gutiérrez perceptively noted, "Taking advantage of the liberal pluralist rhetoric inherent in the Good Neighbor Policy ... Mexican American activists in Texas, like their counterparts in California and elsewhere in the Southwest, achieved some gains in the fight against segregation in schools and other public facilities, in the struggles to gain access to higher paying jobs, and, perhaps most important,

in their efforts merely to gain recognition as fully vested citizens of the United States" (1995, 141). While these intercultural relations helped Mexican American civil rights efforts, economic mobility for workers in the citrus industry remained stagnant (González 1994; Garcia 2001). Despite more job opportunities in the defense industry for some Mexican Americans, ethnic Mexican men and women still faced low wages and racial and gender barriers in the workplace in the postwar years.

## Conclusion

Corona's Mexican Americans effectively negotiated Cinco de Mayo festivals to build a recreational center and as a jumping-off point for future civil rights struggles. Although they did not attain significant economic mobility within the agriculture-dominated local economy, Mexican Americans seized the limited opportunities during fiesta events to advocate social change and to demonstrate their rising political strength to both Anglo and ethnic Mexican communities. In the beginning Mexican Americans used festivals to defend themselves from external racist and nativist attacks; subsequently, they transformed the festivals into vehicles for gaining access to community resources and demanding full participation in American mainstream institutions. In the process, they transformed the Cinco de Mayo celebration from an exclusively Mexican nationalist event to a bicultural Mexican American event aimed at promoting "good neighborly" relations between Mexicans and Anglos, and between the United States and Mexico. In negotiating the cultural and political terrain of the fiesta, Mexican Americans showed neither complete endorsement of corporate values and dominant Anglo culture nor direct opposition to the political-economic order. Instead they opted for an unstable middle-ground position, from which they could appropriate the Good Neighbor policy's ideology and commercial components of the fiesta to make demands upon city government officials and Mexican consul representatives. In other words, Mexican American festival organizers made lemonade out of the lemons they were handed in life. The festival also made possible greater public leadership roles for Mexican American women, who were marginalized behind food booths or publicly displayed as fiesta "beauty" queens. By the 1950s, amidst the politically charged climate of Operation Wetback, McCarthyism, and Cold War hysteria, Corona's Mexican American festival organizer redirected their energies toward raising families and making a living. The Cinco de Mayo festivals were discontinued until the



early 1970s when a new generation of community activists revived and redefined the festival as part of the Chicano and Chicana movement.

## Notes

I would like to thank Linda Heidenreich, José Anazagasty-Rodríguez, George Sánchez, Lon Kurashige and Chiou-ling Yeh for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

1. The city has no relation to Corona Beer, although the company has become a main corporate sponsor of Cinco de Mayo celebrations throughout the United States

2. Although El Club Zaragoza is credited with organizing the first Cinco de Mayo in 1917, several years later the club joined forces with other mutual aid organizations to form the Comité Patriótica in 1923 (*Corona Independent* 5 May 1917; 5 May 1923).

3. Cruz owned two large businesses, Cruz and Sons Grocery Store and Teatro Chapultepec. Named after the famous Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City, Teatro Chapultepec showcased Hollywood silent films, popular *revistas* (variety reviews) filled with satire and comedy, and traveling theater groups. The theater occasionally performed the play *El 5 de Mayo*, as well as *Maximiliano I, emperador de México*, which was performed in Spanish-language theaters throughout the Southwestern United States. See Haas 1995, 142–50.

4. Baseball tournaments became hugely popular events during Cinco de Mayo throughout Southern California (see Alamillo 2002). In Los Angeles, for example, the Mexican Athletic Association of Southern California organized an entire day of athletic events at the Los Angeles Coliseum (*La Opinión* 5 May 1935).

5. Intra-ethnic conflicts over the planning of patriotic festivals are nothing new. At the 1921 Diez y Seis de Septiembre celebration in Los Angeles, the organization sponsored by the Mexican consul of Los Angeles roundly criticized the Alianza Hispano Americana for its lack of cultural authenticity. See Sánchez 1993 and Romo 1983.

6. Los Amigos closely resembled the Unity Leagues, a grassroots political organization founded by Ignacio Lopez (editor of *El Espectador*) and Fred Ross (co-founder of the Community Service Organization) and made up of working-class Mexican Americans fighting for civil rights and political representation (see Garcia 2001).

7. Mexican Americans participated in local efforts to promote inter-American unity, a phrase used by advocates of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy to promote "goodwill" relations with Latin America. The leading advocate was Nelson Rockefeller, head of the Office of Inter-American Affairs,

which promoted the message of “hemispheric unity” through press, radio, motion pictures, and cultural activities. On the Good Neighbor policy in relation to the Mexican American community see McWilliams 1948 and González 1985.

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