

# Documenting a Mexican American Community: The Houston Example

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**Abstract:** The Mexican American population is one of the most significant minority groups in the nation, yet archivists and historians have been negligent in documenting its development. The Mexican American community in Houston, Texas, has been developing for one hundred years and today may well number as many as five hundred thousand people. Since 1978, the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC) of Houston Public Library has been addressing this situation by systematically building a collection of materials relative to the history of Houston's Mexican American populace. These materials include the papers of prominent Mexican American Houstonians, Mexican American families, as well as local Chicano organizations and institutions. Additionally, HMRC has established a supplementary oral history project especially designed for its Mexican American community. To implement this collection strategy, HMRC staff members have actively built a local support network and have become involved in public outreach. As one of the few such programs in the United States, HMRC's Mexican American project could serve as an example for other appropriate institutions dealing with the heritage of this important ethnic group.

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SINCE THE SUMMER OF 1978, the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC) of Houston Public Library has been actively and systematically collecting materials which document the history of the Houston Mexican American experience. This effort has been received with more than a modest amount of enthusiasm by the local Hispanic population as well as by academicians and laypersons who are involved in understanding the development of Spanish-speaking peoples in the United States. Such response has enabled HMRC to assemble a sizeable body of historically valuable research material. Accordingly, since 1980, this program has been described at various professional archival and academic conferences. Seminars on community history have also featured the program as an example of Texas ethnic archives. This explanation of HMRC's Mexican American Collection—its genesis, design, successes, and shortcomings—will enable individuals and institutions to draw from HMRC's experience in addressing the preservation of the Mexican American twentieth-century past, a field which both archivists and historians have long neglected. Institutions and individuals collecting in other ethnic fields might also find value in this recounting of the experiences of HMRC.

By the summer of 1978, the Houston Metropolitan Research Center had been in operation as a division of Houston Public Library for several years and had been active in its mission of locating, acquiring, preserving, and making available to scholars and educators documentary materials relative to the Houston urban region.<sup>1</sup> At that time several academicians were already doing research in the holdings. Among these individuals were two young Chicano historians, Professor

Arturo Rosales of the University of Houston and Professor Alberto Camarillo of Stanford University. Apprised of HMRC's definition as the central, urban research facility of the nation's fifth-largest city, Rosales and Camarillo urged that HMRC begin to focus attention on Houston's massive Hispanic community.

In consultation with Rosales and Camarillo, Don E. Carlton (then head of HMRC), Louis J. Marchiafava (then oral history coordinator and now head of HMRC), and the author identified some basic information sources about Mexican Americans already on deposit in the holdings which could be used as a base for expansion. For example, within the Texas and Local History Department, through which all HMRC materials are referenced, there was a sizeable collection of printed primary and secondary books, reports, and periodicals relative to Hispanics in Houston. These items included such basic sources as newspapers and Houston city directories in which residents of all ethnic groups were listed as were their places of residence and occupations dating back to the 1860s. This type of printed primary material is as essential as the regular census for demographers and students of *barrio* growth. Within various manuscript and archival collections already accessioned there was material dealing with Mexican Americans of the area. The records of the Santa Fe Railroad in the Houston-Galveston region contained company correspondence, contracts, and instructions regarding the hiring of Mexican nationals between 1929 and 1945. The railroad, a traditional employer of Mexican Americans, is a prime example of agency or business papers dealing with the target group. In addition, HMRC's

<sup>1</sup>Don E. Carleton, "A Cooperative Urban Archives Program: The Houston Metropolitan Research Center," *Midwestern Archivist* 6 (no. 2 1982): 177-195.

developing county records collection provided data. HMRC is the regional depository for a seven-county area in the state-sponsored Regional Historical Resource Depository system, and the Mexican American presence was reflected in such items as school census reports. Likewise, statistical information could be gleaned from HMRC's growing municipal records holdings deposited by numerous city departments. One simply had to be imaginative in the use of already accessioned materials to realize what they had to offer relative to Houston Hispanics.

Still, as of the summer of 1978, the holdings did not reflect much of the human side of the Mexican American community's development. There was no material generated by Mexican Americans about Mexican Americans. Such a perspective is absolutely necessary for a balanced understanding of any people.

As historians, staff members understood that no immigrant nationality in Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast merited analysis more than the Mexican Americans. They are distinctive because of geography, history, and present circumstances. With Texas a part of Mexico prior to 1836, only American Indians predated Hispanic presence. Only a single meandering river separates Mexico from the Lone Star State, and people of Mexican origin have traditionally moved back and forth between the two regions so that it has been difficult to establish a clearly demarcated cultural boundary. Mexican Americans are the authentic bridge between the United States and its most important southern neighbor. Today, except for blacks, no other ethnic group forms such a large, identifiable body. In the Houston metropolitan region Mexican Americans number in the hundreds of thousands. They have their own neighborhoods, preserve the Spanish language,

and comprise a recognizable unit in the region's work force. Not only do Mexican Houstonians impact the economic, demographic, and cultural scenes, but, unlike most other national minorities, they also translate their numbers into political representation as city councilmen, justices of the peace, county constables, precinct judges, and state legislators. Also, the Mexican American community is serving as the foundation for other Spanish-speaking people who are increasing their numbers in the city. While each city and region across the United States has its own special set of circumstances which may differ in degree from those of Houston, it is certain that many communities must increasingly count Hispanics as a potent force. This presence must be addressed by each region's institutions, not excluding archival and historical agencies.

Background research indicates that Mexicans had first started to come to Houston as early as the 1870s and 1880s, both from Mexico and from the surrounding areas in Texas. Although Houston dates from the early nineteenth century, it had been founded and first peopled by non-Hispanics immediately after the Texas war for independence; thus, it did not possess an indigenous Hispanic influence as did other urban areas such as San Antonio. By 1900, however, there were approximately one thousand Mexican Americans in Houston. The real flood tide of such immigrants to Houston began after 1910 with the Mexican Revolution so that by 1930 their number reached as high as fifteen thousand. By the 1920s there was a small but viable entrepreneurial class among this group. In the main, however, the people had come to labor in the outlying agricultural regions, in the recently developed Houston ship channel industries, or with the railroads.

The Houston Hispanic community

began to develop on the north and east sides of town near their places of employment in the railroad yards and along the ship channel. Their growth patterns paralleled the rest of Houston; that is, the real surge came after and as a result of World War II. Their numbers have grown so rapidly that it is impossible to estimate the current size of the Chicano community. Some experts maintain there are as many as five hundred thousand people. It may be the third-largest Mexican American center of population in the nation, and the country's fifth-largest concentration of Hispanic peoples.<sup>2</sup>

Archival repositories in the United States, of course, had not totally ignored ethnic materials in their collecting endeavors. A survey of the literature quickly revealed that, reflecting America as a nation of immigrants, American archival institutions had already accomplished enough work in the field to help provide a collecting strategy which HMRC could adapt to its local setting and specific needs. Perhaps the most prominent examples included the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio, which had actively assembled documentation on the American Jewish experience since the late 1940s; the Immigration Studies Collection at the University of Minnesota, which concentrated on people in the United States with roots in southern and eastern Europe and the Middle East; and the Bentley Historical Library of the University of

Michigan, which mainly collected materials dealing with the great migrations of Europeans between 1820 and 1920. Each project targeted similar community-level records and encouraged the use of oral history to address ethnic development.<sup>3</sup> It was clear from these programs that archivists should ignore the misconception that ethnic peoples were somehow illiterate peasants who left no written legacy. The search for grassroots materials required imagination and direct community involvement.<sup>4</sup>

With this basic understanding, HMRC staff members formulated what they felt was a systematic approach to collecting which, with little modification, they have followed ever since. They decided to pursue four basic types of materials. These included papers of individuals influential in the development of the Houston Mexican American community, papers of Mexican American families, and records of local Mexican American organizations and institutions; these existing records were supplemented by materials from an oral history project.

Although the sources targeted were traditional in nature, staff members decided to be activists in implementing the collection policy. They publicized their efforts and established a program of community outreach to convince the Houston Mexican American populace that they were sincerely interested in preserving the materials which accurately documented their history so that this

<sup>2</sup>For stylistic purposes, I use the terms Mexican American, Chicano, and Hispanic interchangeably. While Mexican American and Chicano specifically denote a person of Mexican descent living in the United States, the term Hispanic can also be applied to other peoples originating from the former New World colonies of Spain. Although exact numbers are impossible to ascertain, Houston apparently ranks behind Los Angeles and San Antonio in Mexican American population. New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Antonio lead Houston in total number of Hispanics.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob R. Marcus, "The American Jewish Archives," *American Archivist* 23 (January 1960): 57-61; Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Immigration Studies Collection of the University of Minnesota," *Ibid.* 32 (April 1969): 139-145; Robert M. Warner and Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "Documenting the Great Migrations and a Century of Ethnicity in America," *Ibid.* 39 (July 1976): 319-328.

<sup>4</sup>Richard N. Juliani, "The Use of Archives in the Study of Immigration and Ethnicity," *American Archivist* 39 (October 1976): 469-477.

heritage could be understood by and shared with the other groups who make up the population. Such a policy was necessary in addressing a people who had traditionally been objects of prejudice and discrimination and who, despite years of paying taxes, had seen little return from public agencies in dealing with their needs. The staff believed that through personal contacts and use of the media they could convince people to place their materials with HMRC.

It is important to stress that these items were not located in places that were readily identified and inventoried as most archival agencies might hope. They were in people's trunks and attics, and word of mouth became perhaps the most effective method by which such documents made their way to HMRC. Also, part of the community network included branch librarians of Houston Public Library within the Hispanic neighborhoods. These colleagues, often bilingual and rooted in the local area, took interest in the archival program. They carried the message to people who might otherwise have remained uninformed and on occasion accessioned valuable material for HMRC.

Houston television, radio, and the printed media proved to be extremely generous in publicizing this program. Both major daily newspapers as well as suburban Hispanic-oriented weeklies printed articles on HMRC's efforts. Radio talk-show hosts had the staff dialogue with their listeners. Especially important, however, were the Mexican American public service television programs which afforded ample time to explain the project. In the beginning, such coverage had to be solicited; however, the media in Houston quickly became receptive to HMRC's overtures. In a media-oriented society, nothing lends more credibility to an archival collecting program among the general population than for people to see it on television.

The first type of material—papers of prominent individuals—was probably the easiest to identify. While people who have been in a position to assemble a large body of historically valuable materials are easy to locate, the difficulty arises in negotiations for these papers with the persons or their heirs. The staff quickly contacted and accessioned the papers of the notable Houstonian Leonel Castillo, former city controller and United States commissioner of immigration and naturalization under President Jimmy Carter. Likewise, they accessioned the papers of Ben T. Reyes, former Texas state legislator from Harris County and currently the only Mexican American Houston city councilman. These collections cover many aspects of Mexican American civic and political history since the 1960s and are currently subject to research restrictions. Felix Tijerina, successful restaurateur from the 1930s through the 1960s, was another prominent Houstonian of Mexican descent whose papers were acquired. He was four-term national president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and a friend of governors of Texas and presidents of the United States. His program, called the "Little Schools of the 400," was a pioneer effort in bilingual education and served as a model for Project Head Start. Tijerina's papers were in the possession of his widow, Janie Gonzalez Tijerina, after he died in 1965. After lengthy, serious negotiations regarding the care and disposition of the documents, she placed the papers with HMRC for research and educational purposes. Mrs. Tijerina, a longtime business woman in her own right, included many of her own papers with those of her husband. Lydia Mendoza, an internationally-known singer since the 1930s, also contributed her papers to HMRC. She may well be the most important cultural figure in the Mexican American population living to-

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**MIERCOLES 8 DE AGOSTO, DE 1951**

● DOS FUNCIONES A LAS 7:30 Y 9:30 P. M. ●

★ ESPECTACULOS SELECTOS, PRESENTA ★

**A La Incomparable! - La Unica!**  
**La Formidable Cancionera! La Mimada del Pueblo!**

**EN PERSONA!**  
**"LA ALONDRA DE LA FRONTERA"**

**LIDIA MENDOZA**

**Oícala Cantar\_\_\_\_\_**

**Besando La Cruz**  
**Invierno en Abril**  
**La Que Se Fue**  
**Yo Fui El Culpable**  
**Que me Importa**  
**Un Dia Nublado**

**TODAS ESTAS CANCIONES ESTAN**  
**GRAVADAS POR LIDIA MENDOZA**  
**EN DISCOS FALCON**

**Vienen Tambien con Lidia Mendoza**  
**LAS POPULARES CANCIONERAS**

**Hermanas MENDOZA**

**JUANITA** ★ **MARIA**  
**LA VERSATIL VEDETTE** ★ **PIANISTA Y GUITARRISTA**

**Tambien el Comico Parodista y Buyanguero**  
**"CHAPULIN"**

▲ Por la Pantalla: UNA BONITA PELICULA ▼



Flyers such as this 1951 advertisement of a performance by Lydia Mendoza well illustrate the variety of entertainment for Mexican American audiences. Lydia Mendoza Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



day. Her materials include items normally associated with such artists—flyers, clippings, photographs, music, and other memorabilia assembled over her many years of activity.

Although generally not as large as the collections of prominent people, family papers may be the most meaningful type of documents for the Houston Mexican American experience. The principle is simple. Not everyone has been in a position to amass a large body of papers appropriate for historical research. Just about everyone, however, has retained items relevant to the activity of his or her family that are important to historical scholarship.

Some family collections, of course, are quite extensive and are a real bonanza when accessioned. These larger donations clearly illustrate that in so many ways *la familia*, the basic social unit among Mexican Americans, has preserved the culture over the many decades of adversity. One of the earliest, most complete family collections that HMRC received was the Melesio Gomez Family Papers which reflect the experiences of its members for over half of the twentieth century. The younger daughter of the family, now in her seventies, realizing that the documents she had treasured in her lifetime might be subject to loss, destruction, or dispersal after her passing, responded to HMRC's call for contributions. She correctly reasoned that the archives would provide her family with the service of housing the family records so that descendants and others could utilize them in a central location in perpetuity. In turn, she felt that many of those papers reflected the larger historical development of the community and would be a gift to posterity from her parents. Such papers are not donated lightly by people of a culture whose family structure is such that they hold sacred remembrances of things past. The Gomez Collection

covers most of the episodes and events in the family's life from the parents' migration from the state of San Luis Potosi, through the father's work experience with the railroad and in business, to the involvement of the children in social and civic organizations in Houston. Altogether, the Gomez Papers document in microcosm the acculturation of an entire generation of Hispanic residents.

The first Mexican American-related collection HMRC obtained was the Chairez Family Papers which spans the first decades of this century. This donation was indicative of the positive response to the collecting policy. Members of the extended family contributed one document box of personal correspondence, hand-written music, organizational records, community flyers, and photographs dealing with neighborhood events that cast light on a portion of little-known Mexican American cultural development. Their material included several striking photos taken in the 1920s that indicated the rich reward that awaited the institution that chose to document this pioneer field of Southwestern and American history. The Chairez relatives were the first people in the network that began to build in support of HMRC's effort.

In the majority of cases, however, family collections include no more than a few documents. Such small collections of material seem to be the norm in the Houston Hispanic community. People with only a few historically significant items have been responsive as they feel that they too will be contributing to the preservation of their community's past through donating something they have cherished for many years.

A woman who had resided in Magnolia Park, a predominantly Mexican American Houston suburb, contributed a half-dozen, hand-printed grocery circulars from the 1930s. These circulars adver-



This 1928 photograph of a popular Houston singing and dancing group is representative of items from family collections which document the tenacity of Mexican American culture in the urban regions. Chairez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

tised the merchandise of *La Casa Verde*, Magnolia Park's leading grocery store catering to Hispanic clientele during that period. They list the food commodities for sale and their prices. One can gain some insight into the diet of the community during the Great Depression from just these few items. Another senior resident donated a single issue of a Houston Spanish-language literary magazine published during the 1920s. No library had bothered to keep issues of this periodical. The donor had retained his issue because

his college graduation picture had appeared in its social column. After keeping the magazine in his closet for fifty years, he decided to make it a part of his community's history. The issue contained short stories, poetry, and news features.<sup>5</sup> A women contributed several Houston baseball posters from the 1930s and 1940s. She had saved these circulars, items that are usually printed to be read and discarded, because her late husband was one of the players. Such documents present an interesting slice of Mexican

<sup>5</sup>HMRC has assembled several numbers of this magazine, *Gaceta Mexicana*, through single donations and has microfilmed them so that this resource can be made available to other interested research institutions. As an aside, microfilming is the primary method, at this time, of cooperating with other institutions relative to the Mexican American holdings. Also, one might say HMRC cooperates with other institutions by not collecting outside the geographic region of Houston.



American cultural history probably not recorded elsewhere. Three different donors contributed single items, each dealing with the founding and early days of the oldest *mutualista* (mutual aid society) in the Houston area. This mutual aid society, called *Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez*, began in 1919. These three documents include the society's earliest regulation booklet, its earliest known membership roster, and a photograph, circa 1920, of its leadership recruiting members among local Mexican Americans. In this manner, significant aspects of the twentieth-century Hispanic experience can be preserved one item at a time. An ongoing commitment, perseverance, and resourcefulness in letting prospective donors know what their local archival institution wants are necessary for success in collecting.

The records of organizations and institutions are quite similar to manuscript holdings. It soon became clear, however, that there have been so many Mexican American grass-roots clubs and groups in Houston that it would take an ongoing commitment to deal with them all. The first of several examples is *El Club Cultural Recreativo Mexico Bello*. This group was founded by upwardly mobile, aspiring middle class young men in 1924 and is still in existence. We accessioned their records by directly contacting the president of the club, caucusing with the founding members who were still active, and negotiating a custodial arrangement for their meeting minutes, financial reports, correspondence, membership applications, membership lists, and scrapbooks which had mainly been preserved by one of the group's oldest members. Club contacts of this nature introduced HMRC to the elders of Hispanic Houston, people not necessarily widely known in non-Hispanic circles but whose opinions and assistance are absolutely vital in gaining entree to people with

historically important material. This group represents the oldest living generation of Houston Hispanics, people well into their seventies and eighties, and the HMRC staff consciously decided to address this group first.

*Mutualistas* (mutual aid societies) are perhaps the most basic institution for self-help and self-determination in the Mexican American community. Such groups have existed in Houston since approximately 1919 and have reflected the most fundamental concerns and objectives of Chicanos over the years. One that placed its records with HMRC is called *Union Fraternal*. The materials begin with its founding in 1941 and contain brochures, pamphlets, minutes, financial data, and correspondence, mostly in Spanish.

Another important group whose records are included in the holdings is the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). In Houston, LULAC dates from the early 1930s. Among other LULAC materials are the papers of LULAC Council #60. Established in 1934, it is the oldest council in the area. Its records include correspondence, financial reports, membership information, scrapbooks, pamphlets, meeting minutes, and photographs—standard materials in any organizational archives.

Records of businesses owned and/or operated by Mexican Americans or which employed Mexican Americans are important for research. Staff members began to contact Mexican American photographic studios whose negative and print files provided a wealth of visual documentation on the community. They located Mexican American professional photographers who were active in Houston as far back as the 1920s, when that ethnic community first became truly viable. Indeed, this aspect was perhaps the most surprising feature of the Chicano Collection. The several Houston commercial

photographers whose prints were “discovered” for historical research include Luis Suarez and Jesus Murillo from the 1920s, and Manuel Cantu from the 1930s. While none of their complete negative files survived, hardly a Mexican American collection is accessioned from those decades that does not contain a photograph bearing the distinctive signature of one of those three artists. Mexican Houstonians retained a great many photos taken by these men, probably because of the strength of *la familia* which has ensured that its members would preserve visual reminders of people and events.

Other accessioned business records include materials from newspapers and funeral homes owned by or serving Hispanics. Early mortuary records at HMRC include files from the Morales Funeral Home dating from the 1930s. These papers contain a wealth of information on the deceased, and when handled in an aggregate, impersonal manner can reveal much about the history of the community. Knowing how people died can tell a scholar a great deal about how they lived.

The Mexican American community in Houston has produced local newspapers since at least the 1920s, but, unfortunately, mainstream institutions did not see fit to retain complete files of them. Much work needs to be done in terms of locating and preserving such important printed primary material. Staff members discovered issues from a 1930s newspaper called *El Puerto* in the possession of its publisher who is now well into his seventies. He allowed them to microfilm the issues he had saved from 1935 and 1938. They have also compiled complete runs of more recent newspapers such as *Papel Chicano*, an organ of the Chicano movement in Harris County during the 1970s.

Although crucial in documenting the Mexican American past, church records

have proven to be a disappointing area in HMRC's collecting strategy. Houston's Hispanic churches date from 1911 with the establishment of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, and the majority of Mexican Americans historically have been of the Roman Catholic faith. Because the parish registers are of such recent origin, officials of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston have been reluctant to allow microfilming of these records for general research purposes at HMRC. Perhaps this complication can be resolved in some manner to facilitate accessibility to such quantifiable data. In the meantime, individual church members, Protestant as well as Catholic, have helped to fill the void of the religious record through the donation of fugitive materials such as flyers, brochures, programs, anniversary publications, and other documents related to their religious institutions.

HMRC's policy regarding oral history and the Mexican American community focuses on two types of interviews: the rather traditional episodic format and what has been termed the “Origins of the *Barrio*” questionnaire. There is an effort to supplement almost every item or collection with an oral history session. Oral interviews are not without their problems—there is no perfect tape. The staff concedes that their interviews suffer from most of the deficiencies of all oral histories. Often times, however, there is no record of an event or an institution other than human memory, and no item or collection is so complete that it cannot be greatly improved through an accompanying oral history with the donor explaining gaps in the written evidence. For example, HMRC accessioned the papers of John J. Herrera, longtime Houston attorney, civic activist, and past national president of LULAC. Although his collection is substantial, it is supplemented with eight hours of interviews that span



This mid-1930s photograph taken by Manuel Cantu of a neighborhood raffle in Houston's Mexican American east side may be the only extant document of that community event held during the darkest times of the Great Depression. Rodriguez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



## VOTE FOR

THE "GOOD NEIGHBOR CANDIDATE"  
**John J. (Johnny) Herrera**

FOR STATE SENATOR

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Sale of Liquor by the Drink

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The papers of local activists such as attorney John J. Herrera, supplemented by oral interviews, can reveal much about the political development of the Hispanic population. John J. Herrera Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

almost the entire period of twentieth-century Mexican American development from his vantage point. Records dealing with Houston's role in the important process of repatriation of people to Mexico during the 1930s are almost nonexistent. An oral history conducted with Juan Carrion, a man who made that trek as a youth to and from Mexico, chronicles that struggle in human terms and in a manner impossible to discern through immigration reports.

In another case, HMRC's staff has been unable to locate the records of Houston's earliest known Mexican American community institution, a chapter of the Woodmen of the World founded in 1908. Interviews with a few of its first members, however, have shed light on this organization, its aims, purposes, and the people who were involved in its beginnings. The advanced age of these surviving members mandates a high priority for this project.

The "Origins of the *Barrio*" format is a standard interview created by adapting

a questionnaire developed by Professor Louise Kerr of Loyola University in Chicago. Kerr explores the areas of migration to the community, family history, and the degree of cultural assimilation. The staff adjusted her model to fit the Houston situation, and they have been actively administering it to as many people as they can locate who came to Houston prior to 1930. The foundations of the *barrios* were laid by people of the Mexican Revolution generation, 1910-1930, and their profiles need to be obtained in a uniform manner.

Many of the older members of the Mexican American populace communicate more precisely in Spanish. HMRC was fortunate in finding and making effective use of volunteers to conduct these interviews. Utilization of such community volunteers not only serves to obtain more valuable tape recordings, but also is crucial in building popular support for the program. As mentioned previously, community outreach is absolutely vital to the success of an archival

collecting policy in the Mexican American community.

Often times it has been possible to conduct a more specific, episodic interview with a person after conducting one using the standardized format. One such case involved a man who had come to Houston in 1913 and had worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad for over forty years. His work, family life, and migration experiences well encapsulated an entire generation of Houstonians; however, he was also an amateur comedian during the 1920s at a local Hispanic theatre. In a subsequent interview he related his time on the stage as a young man, shedding light on early Chicano vaudeville, an almost unknown area of social history. This example represents one of many possibilities that await an active archivist/historian in the oral history segment of a good collection program.

One might conclude this mention of oral history with a simple dictum: it is important, but generally it is supplemental. This article has noted some of HMRC's better interviews; there are others that did not go as well. The memories of people in the Hispanic community fade just as any other group's might. Interviews with Mexican Americans have the same limitations that one encounters with any people. One should not have the misconception that oral history is the primary segment of a Mexican American collection, especially in an urban area. Additionally, good interviews are a result of thorough preparation, background research, and a professional understanding of oral history technique.

The numerous, historically valuable materials and interviews to be obtained in the Chicano community are certainly not limited to the few examples cited above. Suffice it to say that the more the resourceful archivist looks, the more he or she will find. Mexican Americans have been involved in the same range of ac-

tivities that other people in our society have.

Acquiring collections and interviews within the Hispanic community involves many of the same techniques one uses when soliciting papers and oral history sessions with any other group. One must contact the person directly or indirectly and explain the situation. Some transactions are brief while others take time depending upon the individual. Always it entails the courtesy and tact required of an acquisitions archivist. One must convey to the potential donors the desirability and advantages of having their papers or recollections preserved in an archives as well as the sincerity of the archival institution in documenting the history of the Mexican American community.

This appears to be an ironclad rule: the nature of gathering Mexican American collections necessitates local effort. Remote mainstream institutions have had little positive effect on the life of the average *barrio* resident; thus, that person rightly feels such an institution has little relevance and merits little of his confidence. Also, efforts by local institutions can insure immediate response to the person's needs. The archivist is only a telephone call or short drive away. Viable regional institutions should be encouraged to take the lead in establishing local holdings whenever possible.

Public educational programming has directly resulted from HMRC's Mexican American archival component. The growing body of LULAC materials, for example, has served as the catalyst to bring together the Mexican American Studies Program of the University of Houston, Houston LULAC Council #60, and HMRC to sponsor jointly a conference entitled "LULAC in Historical Perspective, 1929-1984," on 11 February 1984. Held at the Houston Public Library, it was a daylong affair featuring ten speakers—six academicians and four

past national LULAC presidents. The conference analyzed the League of United Latin American Citizens over its fifty-five years of existence as perhaps the most important Hispanic organization in the United States. Concurrently, HMRC mounted a display of documents on deposit—"LULAC over Fifty Years in Houston: An Archival Exhibit." The public response was gratifying as several hundred people, Hispanic and non-Hispanic alike, attended the conference over the course of the day. Such efforts can thus serve to increase the historical consciousness of the Mexican American community as well as simply to preserve its documentary evidence.

Perhaps this outline of HMRC's approach to Mexican American archival collecting will lead to wider public atten-

tion to this program as a cultural, educational, and scholarly resource. It has been part of an escalating interest in ethnic collecting across the United States since the 1970s. Certainly, there has been increasing activity in the development of Mexican American-related archival sources, especially in the Southwest. Among the more impressive ones are the Mexican American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin and the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California at Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> Other appropriate institutions should be encouraged to begin similar programs to help meet the needs of future research. There is much to be done as scholars continue to turn their attentions to the growing presence of the Hispanic in this society.

<sup>6</sup>F. Arturo Rosales and David William Foster, eds., *Hispanics and the Humanities in the Southwest: A Directory of Resources* (Tempe: Center for Latin American Studies, Arizona State University, 1983), pp. 104, 252.