

Episode 4: Spanish-American War Era, History & Memory

Transcript

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Steve Sisson: Hello, and welcome back to History and Memory podcast with Alexander Mendoza, where we're covering Tejanos and American wars. We are in our fourth episode. We've just finished going through the post Texas Republic and into becoming a state in the Union, and then all the way through the Civil War. And this next period will be the period from what is typically called Reconstruction, so post 1865 all the way through the Spanish American War, and which takes us pretty much to the turn of the century, the nineteen hundreds. And a lot of interesting things happening during this period in terms of it seems like a sleepy time in US history.

And as you mentioned in your book, Alex, the Spanish-American War is a forgotten war in America, really. Has become, it's just not something really discussed outside of, I think, Roosevelt's, you know, Teddy Roosevelt's, obvious image that that there is of him being this, this warrior and hunter and his conscript his decision to be a part of this. But there's really a lot of things happening during this period of time, both for our characters that we are following through this arc, the experience of being person in the military, in the US military of Mexican American descent, but also some many of the tensions that we're tracking right now in US history are showing up here. This one is especially important because we have this is the period in which The US becomes an imperial power, where it basically starts to stretch its flex its muscles and stretch its socioeconomic and military capacities, and much is never to be changed, never to go back to something else after this period of time. Would you say that's accurate?

Alex Mendoza: I think that's 100% accurate. This is America flexing its imperial muscles for the first time. This is America establishing its worth in the hemisphere. This is the nation kind of reminding people of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine in a way. And this is something that that's going to resonate well into the move towards the notion of The United States as a superpower by the midpoint of the twentieth century.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. But before we get there, we're coming out of a period of time where the US has gone from a fractured state into a, to coming back together from the dissolution of the Confederate States back into the Union. And talk a little bit about what, what this means for those who live in the border region. Because we know that there's a lot of, lot more beginning to be some more Anglo people folks moving into Texas, but generally not into the Rio Grande Valley, not into the border the *La Frontera* area that we've been talking and tracking throughout this period of time. But what is lifelike post-Civil War for these folks?

How does Reconstruction have an impact for them?

Alex Mendoza: Generally, they did not really experience much change. For the most part, the Tajano population in the Lone Star State after the Civil War remains fixated, basically South

Texas. There were three pockets, the East Texas region around Nacogdoches, San Antonio and obviously the Texas Mexico border along the Rio Grande. And for them, life really doesn't change much because as we've kind of established before in other episodes, they generally don't own slaves. They generally are relegated to much of the menial labor, and they still have practiced ever since the early Texas Republic period, this process of accommodation with those Anglo newcomers.

So they've been able to kind of coexist, those that are well-to-do, that are landowners, ranch owners, they remain in power and other Tejanos just kind of vote along those lines and vote with them. But generally, they haven't been displaced for them. It's life as usual. Life is normal. But the changes are coming.

Know, as you alluded to, at turn the of the twentieth century, Texas will change. Its economy will change. It will be modernized. It will displace more agrarian lifestyle and agricultural work. But for this point, post-Civil War, it still continues, livestock, farming, and the economics are basically the same.

And as we both know, there really is no clamp down on the border. I mean, it's come and go as you please. The existence of the border patrol is still until the 1920s. So the open border free trade is natural. It's a natural occurrence for the Tejano population.

Steve Sisson: And many of them have family on either side, and it's not river isn't the political boundary that it is a political boundary, but it's not the sociopolitical boundary it is today, the sociopolitical cultural boundary that it is today.

Alex Mendoza: All the way up to the World War I period, a historian, Emilio Zamora, basically cycled the idea that there's like this double migration. You know, people come and live in Texas for a short time, then move back to Mexico, and they just kind of have this movement, this back and forth because it's easy. It's common. And there's no qualm about it. There's no hesitation.

People just move back and forth, seasonal work, live in Texas for a year or two, and then essentially move back.

Steve Sisson: But after the Civil War, there were opportunities to join the military, because this is something we're tracking through this whole podcast series, is there were opportunities for African Americans to join and be in their own units, and they had segregated units actually, which of course is easy for us to point at now as being why did they segregate, but in some ways it may have been a more the best situation for the African Americans at the time. I don't know what a non-segregated situation would have looked like. But no, these opportunities were not afforded to Tejanos. They were not really encouraged to join the military, they weren't excited about joining the military, and there weren't these kinds of opportunities. I mean, do we call this an opportunity, or is it more of like there weren't many other job opportunities?

Don't know. What do we make of this opportunity that's there for African Americans, but lack of opportunity for the Mexican American populations?

Alex Mendoza: A historian by the name of Ed Coffman, he wrote this book called *The Old Army*, and the army of the nineteenth century was rough. I mean, it really didn't have upward mobility. It didn't really give you the sense of advancement. Discipline was harsh. The conditions were often lonely and barren.

But what he points out is that it gave people at least the economic opportunity for a steady paycheck, the chance to leave one's home. And sometimes that mattered if you needed to leave the East Coast and go to the West. So it gave people at least this sense of stability the safety net. But to your point, ironically, after the civil war, the opportunities for Mexican Texans to join the United States Army essentially dried up. I mean, they established, the US Army established, the War Department established this criteria that you had to speak English.

And sometimes not every Tejano could speak English or had this dual language capabilities. And when I was studying the civil war, I came across this memoir from a gentleman by the name of Santiago Tafoya, who lived in New Mexico, joined the US Army, and then moved to Texas after his stint ended, joined the Confederate Army, then deserted the Confederate Army, moved to Mexico, and then he came back to Texas after the Civil War was over. But the opportunities for the Army by that point dried up. The emphasis on language became important, and therefore, you have the opportunity afforded to black units to, you know, the Buffalo Soldiers to African Americans. But for the Tejanos population, they just found that opportunity to be somewhat limiting, at least in the peacetime army when the shift moved from being a police force in Reconstruction to frontier duty.

And only in a time of war will it be opened up again, but until the turn of the twentieth century.

Steve Sisson: And speaking of frontier, I want to name check one of my favorite characters in US history, Randolph "Bad Hand" Mackenzie, who I do I've always been into reading about Native American, Indigenous, and Native American war with The US, and so he is such an interesting character because his ability to basically end much of what we saw, especially in the Mexico-US border region that we're talking about, but also north up into New Mexico all the way into Arizona. He became known for being incredibly good at eradicating indigenous troubles. But he also was known for being really capable of working well with these Buffalo Soldiers, these black troops, and had none of the same issues that George Armstrong Custer, by the way, had lots of issues with that. And so anyway, I just wanted to name check "Bad Hand." He has a name "Bad Hand" because the indigenous said that he'd lost two fingers and he had a weird hand.

But anyway, I love him. But also, the Texas Rangers are now post-Civil War, operating with some level of authority but still continuing to create life for Tejanos and Mexican Americans on the border region, their lives aren't they're definitely a feared group.

Alex Mendoza: Most definitely. And that fear will only exacerbate more when the World War One period, when the twentieth century hits. But in the late nineteenth century, they are there as a law enforcement agency to deal with rustlers, to deal with outlaws, to deal with security. And you know, that open border philosophy during the cattle drives that makes Texas more Texas than what it has become, they that certainly will give them an opportunity to flex their muscles, so to speak, much of the chagrin of the Tejano population.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. And one of the things that's going on during this period of time as we go into the Spanish American War as is how this idea of banditry and some revolutionary activity that's going on the border, really, as you and I trace you traced this out in the book, and then you and I discussed off camera, just how this question of loyalty of solidifies during this period about are Tejanos, are Mexican Americans loyal to The US cause that we've been tracing so far, but now it begins to look a little different. Can you set the stage for us here about how this transpires, how this goes on? Again, we've already been noting many troubles that are going on in the border area, but things seem to change here over the as we go into the Spanish American War, and then they sort of calcify and remain more than racism. Right?

Something much more than racism is going on here.

Alex Mendoza: Most definitely. And there's, like, two layers going on to, like, this this focus on the Mexican population in Texas and at the larger level at The United States level. The late nineteenth century has a lot of changes in terms of immigration. And as those changes are taking place, the new immigrants that are arriving into the nation are coming in from Southern and Eastern Europe, from nations that don't necessarily speak English. So the emphasis on what America means, what America's future stands for, all that's going to come to a head, especially after 1876.

That's when the United States celebrates its centennial. And it's like a major accomplishment, one hundred years of democracy, one hundred years of ideals, one hundred years of government. And while the nation is trying to reconcile the healing from Reconstruction with the celebration of its one hundredth birthday, it also has to reckon with how immigrants are driving wages down, how immigrants are altering that fabric that people want to celebrate after 1876. So, in the nation, as the country begins to flex its imperial muscles at the end of the nineteenth century, that's going to come to a head too. But in Texas, at a more precise level, those Anglo newcomers that you mentioned just a couple of minutes ago, they're going to come in conflict for the same reason with the Tejano population, because more likely than not in the Rio Grande Valley or in Eagle Pass or in Del Rio or in El Paso or Laredo or San Antonio, the kind of population finds it necessary to not even speak English and therefore, it kind of resonates with the incoming Anglo population and at the same time that you have that going on, there is outlawry and bandits crossing, because of cattle and cattle rustling along those South Texas ranches.

If you ever follow the intricacies of Larry McMurtry and *Lonesome Dove*, whether it's the book or the miniseries that follows, I mean, you could kind of get an idea of this this border, how fluid it

is but then finally, what really sets things on edge is the revolutionaries after Porfirio Diaz takes control of Mexico. I mean, Diaz will rule in a quasi-dictatorship for well over three decades. And what that has done is that many of Mexico's elite, the middle class, the well-to-do, they have fled Mexico to Texas. And from Texas, they begin to agitate against the country of Mexico. Now, The United States has a lot of economic ties with the Versus regime and the idea of railroad building, the idea of manufacturing and whatnot.

So when an official from the Diaz regime, Matias Romero, the U. S. Minister of Finance, writes an article denouncing these revolutionaries along the border against the Diaz regime, And he suggests that the Tejano population is susceptible to the influences of many. What it does is heighten the alarm of the authorities in Austin. I mean, they're the ones that are now scared of like where this loyalty, how it never really has manufactured itself towards the stars and stripes, how it never really has emphasized anything having to do with Texas.

So they become alarmed, not only because of their own well-to-do, but the economic future of the Lone Star State. They begin to worry about perceived loyalty or assimilation or Americanization more than ever right around the turn of the twentieth century, and especially as we head towards the country at war against Spain in 1898.

Steve Sisson: But he called out this population, the Tejano population basically in this, in this thing that he put out, saying he thought they were they were ripe for taking advantage of to help them in their cause. Right? I mean, in essence, there's nothing like a red flag. That's a red flag to end all red flags.

Alex Mendoza: Yeah. And to emphasize, I mean, this is an American publication the *North American Review*. And what he's basically telling Anglo Americans; he's calling them out. You have to control the border. And the reason he does that is because Tejanos are susceptible to manipulation. They're susceptible to suggestions from those revolutionaries like Catarino Garza and others. And what he also does is he points out that Tejanos have never amalgamated with Anglo Texas. So you could kind of view this from a different perspective. Like Tejanos are proud of their language, they're proud of their heritage, they're proud of celebrating religious holidays, They're proud of celebrating like their own ideas of Mexico. But what this does is this sends shock waves to the authorities in Austin and the Texas Rangers and others along the border that believe it is of the utmost importance to emphasize loyalty and assimilation more than anything.

Steve Sisson: And to me, one of the things that I find so interesting throughout The US history in this period of time generally is how much we focus on racism but don't focus on classism. And what this sounds to me is a obviously classist diatribe, basically a Mexican saying, Look, the the Mexicans in this border region, th- he- he uses very, very denigrating language in that article about this group of people. And you can read it as racist if you chose to, but you have to realize who's saying the words is someone who's of the same Although he's probably from Southern Mexico, probably from Mexico City region, but just, just to say that the classist aspect of this gets mixed in, this poverty and poorness and, and this area, these folks want to just be left

alone, to do what they've been doing forever, which is to work hard, to raise their families, to practice their religion, and to be a people of a place. And I just find it, again, a group of people that just tries to do what they're trying just trying to be who they are, get placed in impossible situations outside of anything that they've done themselves.

Alex Mendoza: Most definitely. And I think your point of class biases, that's going to really be one of the ideas that I hope we get a chance to talk about at length, which is the George Washington Birthday celebration in Laredo right around 1898. Because in order to emphasize Americanism, assimilation, celebrating a purely American holiday to counter the day of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* and the *Cinco de Mayo*, and the *Diciseis de Septiembre*. To counter all that, you're celebrating the very first president's birthday in an area where he never visited. And it's red, white and blue. But the Anglo leaders of Laredo, which are less than 10% of the city's population, are helped along by the well-to-do elite Tejano population.

And that's going to maintain and hold on for one hundred plus years. I mean, that celebration is still going on. You know, the subject of *Texas Monthly* and *National Geographic* and documentaries. But bottom line is that the Tejano population accomplishes this, cooperates with this in order to keep things happy to accommodate.

Steve Sisson: And it was a party. I mean, was a party. As you describe it in the book, you didn't go into depth, but I was like, that sounds like it was an amazing was, like, weekend or week long or something, and it was a crazy party.

Alex Mendoza: Yeah. And one of the things that, historians have done other historians have done a much better job than I. Elliot Young, who got his PhD at UT Austin roughly when we were there, he published a dissertation and then a book, but he's done work significantly on the history of the celebration. But what is funny is that it began celebrating, obviously, George Washington, but the Tejano population felt like they were cast aside just a little bit. So they incorporate eventually a Princess Pocahontas pageant. That the Tejano population was going to have their display and they were going to play obviously Native Americans and the well-to-do at least early on the well-to-do Laredo Anglo population were going to play George Washington. It's like a debutante ball. It's like a celebration. But to this day, the whole city shuts down, schools closed down for parades, air shows, celebration, and it's like four or five days still to this close everything closes.

Steve Sisson: It's crazy.

Alex Mendoza: Big celebration.

Steve Sisson: Well, hope we can bring that back, pull that thread and bring it back in. But as we transition from this sort of reconstruction, what's going on in this, things staying the same but yet something's changing, Things are really going to shift here as we go into the how do we set up in Central Texas, Central Texas down into South Texas, what's going on? Because the Spanish American War does become a very big challenging thing for the border region because of Spain

and their long- the Mexico and this whole area was Spain's Spanish property for extended periods of time, and many of the folks in these areas are still have some Spanish ancestry. They're indigenous and Spanish, and so this creates a challenge for, again, for a population who's in between, who's stuck in this in between space, not sure how to effectively be American, but yet also honor some of their legacy and traditions. And again, you lay it out here where primarily what folks do is sit back and wait.

Again, sit back and wait.

Alex Mendoza: And that's going to be probably much to their detriment that they sit back and wait because the Spanish American war was driven, this is like an all-volunteer war, and it's driven by the media, the yellow press, as they were called. It's driven by war fervor because of what happened in February 1898, the explosion of the USS *Maine*. It is driven also in part by rage against Spanish officials who dare call the president of The United States weak and cowardly, just a bitter for the admiration of the crowd. All of this is going to come back to Tejanos because they don't demonstrate the appropriate level of loyalty, the appropriate level of American pride. And suffice it to say, it's important to note that in 1898, the Spanish American War also symbolized something larger than war fervor, war angst.

It also resonated with the Confederate and Union veterans. At this point they're old men, older than us. And in 1898, the Spanish American War carries, an additional paradigm, and that is it's a war that is going to reunify the country. It's the first war after, the Civil War. So there's, like, some famous imagery of Union and Confederate veterans shaking hands.

You know, this idea of reunion, there is an actual Confederate general who will volunteer for the Spanish American War and get accepted. So this war is on so many levels about American pride. And Tejanos, by choosing to sit this one out, are only going to heighten this this sense of fear and paranoia that they are, in fact, disloyal, that they are truly not assimilated yet. And it's going to lead to a great deal of stress for many of those on the border, because to them, as they choose to set this this out, they've always recognized Texas under seven flags if you live in Laredo or Texas under six flags, and it's going to get some people in trouble. Educators in El Paso.

Steve Sisson: Yeah, this story is crazy. This story is.

Alex Mendoza: Yeah, this is, W. H. T. Lopez. And I was amazed coming across the El Paso newspapers and reading about this. For example, all Lopez was doing was celebrating in his classroom the six flags of Texas, and one of those just happened to be the Spanish flag. But in this heightened sense of fear and paranoia, and this is not going to be the only time this happens, it's going to happen later, World War I, World War II. But for Lopez in El Paso, it led to murmurs and accusations that he was in fact harboring Spanish sympathies. And at this time, not only El Paso, but along the Texas Mexico border, there was fears of Spanish insurgency, Spanish influence, and it was going to lead to raids into the Texas side of the Rio Grande. But Lopez was so alarmed by the public clamor against his supposed Spanish sympathies that he

had to write in and point out that he had no ill will towards The United States, that Texas had treated him well, that he loved being an American, and that the only reason he had a Spanish flag was for educational purposes.

And eventually the controversy died down, but the fact that he had to write in and to explain himself truly resonates with how the public seemed to perceive any potential slight by Tejanos. And this filters all the way down to the border, of course, all the way down.

Steve Sisson: happens in Laredo again, right? A city leader is also accused of disloyalty.

Alex Mendoza: This is a war that is all volunteers. There's no draft. So what happens is in 1898, people join the ranks of the army that will go fight in Mexico I'm sorry, go fight in Spain. And a lot of these people that are of Mexican descent, as you pointed out, they choose to remain on the sidelines. But by doing so, the fact that they didn't sign up like Teddy Roosevelt, who resigned his commission as assistant secretary to the Navy to go join the ranks of the Rough Riders, it just gives that perception that Tejanos really have no stakes in this country.

And in Laredo, this important city leader, Amador Sanchez, he has the quote of the day when he has to defend why he didn't join Troop K out of Laredo. I mean, it's only about 100 soldiers. And the *Laredo Times*, a local newspaper, they printed out the names of every troops and there's very, very few Spanish surnames, maybe less than a handful out of the 100 plus men. But what's important is they also point out all the donations that locals gave to support the ranks of Troop K. And again, Spanish names are absent from the ranks and the roll call.

But Sanchez finds it so appalling that his loyalty has been put into question that he has to write in. And he has, to me, one of the best explanations. He says, "I am an American first, last and all the time." And that's a quote that he points out, but he mentions that he's got a large family, that he doesn't believe that his volunteering is going to make any significant change to the outcome of this war, which he thinks is going to be over quickly because The United States is such a powerful force that it's most likely going to be a displacement for him and his loved ones. But by and large, he defends himself.

He believes he has to defend himself from these public accusations. But as I read through the Laredo newspaper from around this time period, this war is going to be over quickly. I mean, it's known as the Splendid Little War for a reason.

Steve Sisson: It's Again, Teddy Roosevelt's words. Not sure everyone would consider a Splendid Little War except for someone like Teddy.

Alex Mendoza: Most definitely. But many of the men who ended up fighting, some of them who joined the ranks of the Texas forces never even see Cuba. So they're right back where they started from. And it kind of proves Sanchez's point. But again, I mean, there's like this sense of paranoia, the sense of perceived disloyalty that that really, really impacts the Tejano population because of this war.

Steve Sisson: And then they're basically throughout South Texas into West Texas, anyone who's going back across the border back and forth is under is under they're being tracked, watched, under suspicion.

Alex Mendoza: No. No. No. Definitely. Like, there's newspaper reports from near Cleburne, which is basically North Texas.

There's newspaper reports out of West Texas that their Tejano population has all of a sudden dwindled. And again, they use that as a sign, as evidence, that they were all disloyal to begin with, that they're going back to Mexico because they harbor Spanish sympathies. And what really kind of resonates in the city of Eagle Pass, which is about 150 miles northwest of Laredo, along the border across from Piedras Negras, Mexico, they raised over \$4,000 for the Spanish cause. And this is something that Texas officials, that Anglo Texans, found alarming because it just proved their point, that Tejanos are not to be trusted, Tejanos are disloyal, Tejanos certainly want to wish ill will upon the United States and its armed forces.

Steve Sisson: But we do have one character, though, who is excited about joining the the cause of this splendid little war, although he also doesn't spend any time in Cuba. But tell us a little bit about, Augustine De Zavala and his sister. We've already mentioned his sister once in this podcast, in episode two, I believe, but, well, maybe even it was episode one. But tell us a little bit that it's a place where we have written letters, personal correspondence, which gives us a little more of a flavor and taste for someone's real experience, Tejanos real experience during this period as a member, as a in the military force?

Alex Mendoza: So certainly, Agustin De Zavala, and what's unique about him, for one thing, he is the grandson of the vice president of the Texas Republic, the short-lived vice president of the Texas Republic. So, he is the grandson and he is the younger brother of Adina De Zavala, who will through her efforts, make the Alamo a historic shrine, so to speak, by the turn of the twentieth century. But he is well educated. He comes from a politically and well-to-do family. I mean, in fact, when De Zavala was vice president, they had a lowercase "d," you know, de Zavala, lowercase "d." But by the time his grandson joins the US Army, it's a capitalized "D." What that suggests is that they really try to elevate themselves socially. But he signed up for the one simple reason that he wanted to move up politically and economically in the Alamo City. That was his goal. And he outlines this in his personal correspondence.

He's got a bachelor's degree. He is educated at college, but he is young. So, he knows that the opportunities are there afterwards. And certainly, this is a day and age where presidents, politicians, I mean, they rely on their veteran status. I mean, presidents like, Ulysses S. Grant and others.

Steve Sisson: This happens, too, in the twenty first century.

Alex Mendoza: So far.

Steve Sisson: Well, it stops. You know? It stops. I'm not sure George Bush Junior or Dubya or whatever we want to call him really was in the military, but whatever. Right?

Alex Mendoza: Certainly. These are the heroes of the nineteenth century. It's the military who are the heroes, the ones that are able to catapult their military experience into political office or economic advancement. Anto Savala is desperate. I mean, he is desperate to advance economically. His sister and his mother, who hold a semblance of clout over him, question why he joined the ranks of the military.

And he reassures him. He's young. He's fresh out of college. He's got no family, no attachments. This is an opportunity for him to make a name for himself.

He's only like 20 years old. So he envisions that he'll go off, maybe earn an accolade or two, a promotion, and then he'll be back and sit in the catbird seat in San Antonio. But as we mentioned just a minute ago, this is a very short war. He grows frustrated, De Zavala grows frustrated with the fact that there is no movement towards Florida and eventually Cuba.

He seems to be stuck first in Camp Mabry, and then they move him to a camp in Alabama before they ship him to Florida, which he never makes it to Florida before the war is over. But he gets flustered and frustrated by the stagnation of advancement and promotion. He's a college educated young man. So, he begins to write his sister while he's in Alabama, and he complains about it. Soldiers always complain about food, shelter, but he complains that they offer no writing desks for those who enlisted.

So he has to write haphazardly on his bunk. But he begins to write her, and he does what, like, a military soldier is not supposed to do. He urges her to seek a promotion for him there in San Antonio with a high ranking officer in the US Army, the commander of his unit who happens to be in San Antonio. But he urges her to not make it seem like it's coming from him, to just be discreet and nonchalant. And maybe if she goes and meets with him, maybe he'll get advanced and promoted.

But he's trying to move heaven and earth to actually advance politically and economically, and it never transpires. It never happens. So the war is going to be over before he goes back to San Antonio, You're stuck at his initial rank. No advancement, no promotion, obviously, no heroism. You know, no wartime accolades, no charging up a hill, nothing.

So, what he demonstrates is that one of the threads that continues to pop up is why Tejanos joined the ranks of the military. And absent is still that idea of national loyalty or patriotism or nationalism. You know, when we talk about memory, that subject always pops up when the unveiling of a statue or a plaque or the naming of a post office. You know, they love their country. They love their nation.

But what I suggest is that it's far more complex. And the Augustine De Zavala case certainly resonates with that.

He's just looking out for himself. He's looking for his well-being, and this is not abnormal. And many of the men who join the ranks of the military do this. They join because they're curious about what they could see in terms of adventure.

They want to secure a better life for themselves and maybe their families. And some will fight for nationalism and patriotism, but that is still absent in the Tejano population. In the case of De Zavala, he certainly wanted to fight only so he could advance his own well-being.

Steve Sisson: One of the threads that you write about, I think you mentioned it twice in this chapter about the reasons why people fight. One thing you mention at least twice is the idea of masculinity, of this aspect of this period of time that men don't have a way to show their manhood. And it sounds like De Zavala is in a similar place in this situation. And it makes me think about Teddy Roosevelt as the kind of model for what people are seeing. Of course, are forgetting the class, the racist and classist situation in which Teddy Roosevelt is even, even in the position that he is, and he is able to turn these things into what he wants because of his power and connections and ability to move, and some of his outsized personality, but I wonder about this idea of masculinity as a piece later in our wars, basically throughout this whole time, no women are fighting in wars, right?

And so, it's a really important piece, and we haven't touched base on it yet, and I thought maybe this is something we can talk a little bit about as we think about memory, move this into this, again, back to Laredo, and why it is we have this huge celebration that's named after the first president of The United States, and then also the sort of like what is the Spanish American War? It's kind of like a nothing war, and how does that affect our memory? So, I don't know, there's a lot of threads to pull together there, but maybe we can take a stab at it.

Alex Mendoza: Yeah, the first one I'd like to pull is, you actually called Roosevelt at the beginning of today's podcast, you called him a warrior. And there's a dual biography of him and President Woodrow Wilson, and it's entitled *The Warrior and the Priest*. So, the warrior is perfect for Teddy Roosevelt, but he exemplifies that that concept of manhood and personifies it to that end. I mean, big game hunter. This is a man who clearly resigned his own very important political office to join the ranks of the military.

Steve Sisson: I mean, but before we get started, did everybody real- people realize he had rickets and didn't- he couldn't actually move as a kid. He, I was in- he was in like leg braces and things when he was a little boy. So, I think some of this is this outsized need for a making up for something in a sense too. Anyway, just say that because it's important, I think, when Teddy Roosevelt gets painted with this brush, people don't realize trauma creates much of the image of some of these, especially these heroes of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. It's about retelling a story like Custer.

Like, there's so many of these folks that we've got throughout history that are remaking themselves in a period when the Tejanos don't have the same they hear these stories, but they don't have the same pathways.

Alex Mendoza: No, absolutely. And we talk about Roosevelt and obviously his background kind of influences his young adulthood and adult years. But in a broader concept, this is a nation that is modernizing, that is shifting, and men have not found that outlet to demonstrate that level of manhood or manliness like you had in previous generations. I mean, war with Mexico in the 1840s, another war between the states in the 1860s, the frontier wars, the War of 1812, but there's been a lull. And historians have proclaimed that the frontier has been closed since 1890.

So there's been this lull right at the last tail end of the nineteenth century where there's a void. The veterans from the Civil War are getting older and dying in the 1890s. You know, the well-to-do Tejanos like Santos Benavides also die in the 1890s. So, for the younger generation, for those that are up and coming, there seems to be like this need to demonstrate and show your self-worth as a man, to demonstrate manhood,

Steve Sisson: So interesting to me. As we wrap up this episode, let's pull this thread of memory one more time, especially around this George Washington's Birthday celebration. How does this how do you see this party, and from this lens of how we remember Tejanos and American Wars and from the memory perspective? Not just the historical element, but what pieces this representative of our long project that we're going to be tracing through all these episodes?

Alex Mendoza: Most certainly. Like in 2004, Laredo celebrated, and I remember I covered it in the book, and we're going to get back to it eventually. But Laredo celebrated in 2004 the unveiling of the very first Congressional Medal of Honor statute for Hispanics, Hispanics only. There's now a Congressional Medal of Museum in Arlington just opened up last year. But this is 2004, like over twenty years ago.

And what they emphasized was the spirit of patriotism and nationalism there on the border, that it was always present. They even had all the adornments related to the George Washington birthday celebration. Of course, they unveil it on July 4. So, patriotism was personified. Now, how does that reflect in terms of George Washington celebration?

Because that's when it started, when the fervor of the war against Spain first surfaced in 1898. And I think it kind of manifested itself into something larger, something that's long standing that cultural historians are still fascinated by. Like how does a town, which to the present day is still 90% plus Hispanic, a town that, is relatively poor by modern day standards, has always been relatively poor in whatever decade you're talking about. How did it celebrate the birthday of a president who never visited Texas wasn't even in the cards by the time Washington died. So what they've suggested is that it became something larger, became a way to sort of answer those critics of the Diaz regime and this lack of assimilation, lack of Americanization.

And it gave well-to-do Tejanos an opportunity to further cement their ties to the prominent Anglo community members. For example, during the Civil War, Santos Benavides' main unit was comprised of his brothers and his brother-in-law, a man by the name of John Leyendecker, who was an in-law. And what's important is that the spirit of accommodation was always made through marriage, baptisms, or any support for those religious celebrations. So, you basically become a godparent. But in 1898, once the Washington birthday celebration became a reality, here's another way to cement those accommodating ties.

Because the celebration, as it grew larger and larger by the twentieth century, seemed to tie the Anglo community and the Tejanos community by demonstrating their loyalty and pride in one's nation. I mean, to this day, after that 2004 unveiling of the Congressional Medal of Honor statute to Hispanics, they unveiled a statue to George Washington, which stands in front of City Hall. So no local leaders, but you know, a faraway leader that symbolizes the idea of patriotism and nationalism. So I think that in 1898, the Washington birthday celebration became a way for the Tejano population to celebrate and cement that idea that they were truly loyal and extremely patriotic.

Steve Sisson: Interesting. Red, white, and blue. And then we're going to be tracking that through these next major military conflagrations that are now going way beyond our—actually not being fought on our soils, but on soil in other—in completely different places. And that's going to be interesting. And also, we're going to be moving into an era that many people are calling modern, and so there's going to be major changes to the kind of information that you have in terms of at your fingertips, in terms of research, and the way you research, and what you can find, as well as what America was becoming and the way America became America in the twentieth century. I mean, I think I read recently somewhere someone was talking about how the twentieth we've always called the twentieth century the American century, but that that the twenty first century is still continuing that thread, but will it will it continue and how does that play?

But the opportunities and or lack of opportunities for our Tejanos in American wars are going to be interesting to track and trace as we continue to trace their experiences throughout this podcast. Also, just I loved this idea of memory and history as the thread that we're pulling throughout because of how we're remembering what happened and how much our memory is dependent upon the powers that be's determination of what it is we will celebrate. So who is it that actually created the idea of George Washington's Birthday, in Laredo? You know, maybe you can find those, but that's not what we're talking about. We're just talking about something else.

But how, how these things happen, small little steps by certain people create visions and opportunities and ideas that cement for people over an extended period of time. And I just want to pull, finally, just this last little piece of how much this period of time and the loyalty question about Tejanos on the border area and what they who they are as Americans really is becomes front and center as a major challenge for this demographic to be able to overcome in the coming episodes that we'll be talking about. Where we know that has been a part of the daily life of

Tejanos in the border region, but now it becomes something much bigger as we go into the twentieth century because it's impacting at so many levels, and you can't just ignore it because it's a part of the way the modern world works, newspapers, the experience of that. Everyone is inundated with information and history as it's becoming written. And so this vision of Tejanos maybe being disloyal, not having the loyalty, is something that, your book is really, really highlighting as something we've got to wrestle with as our memory of this period of time, and our memory of a, of a group of people who have made an important have had an important role in what it is to be American throughout this period.

Alex Mendoza: One of the things that I think about whenever you're mentioning that is the importance of, like, considering the idea that maybe patriotism and nationalism is not going to be the same for every single person. As the nation modernizes, people have different stakes as to what it means to them, and that's going to be one of the recurring themes for the next couple of conflicts, next couple of episodes, the next couple of chapters to go over.

Steve Sisson: Cool. Well, thanks, Alex. I appreciate you, and this has been fun, and we will see everyone again in the next episode.

Alex Mendoza: Most definitely. Thank you.