

Episode 5: World War I, History & Memory

Transcript

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Steve Sisson: Hello, and welcome back to the History and Memory podcast with Dr. Alexander Mendoza, where we are covering Tejanos in American Wars. And in this episode, we are moving through the period from the Spanish American War and the turn of the twentieth century into the World War into and through World War I. Alex, how are you this fine afternoon?

Alex Mendoza: Doing splendidly, enjoying the nice cold front we're getting in May.

Steve Sisson: Yes, it's been wonderful here, so. Well, Alex, let's jump right in, because as you mentioned off the recording that you're concerned that we will have a lot of content today, given all of the amount of things that happened during this window, but also in your writing of the book, this chapter was really hard for you to winnow down from the 50+ pages that the chapter was initially intended in, or could have been down to a 30 to 35 page window. So tell us a little bit about that in terms of your writing of this, like how you frame getting as much content covered as possible within a context that's also digestible, right? How that plays out, just for our listeners, because I think it's important for them to hear that so much has been on, so much history is on the cutting room floor when we do these things.

Alex Mendoza: Certainly, like in our private conversations, one of the things you mentioned is that many of these chapters can stand alone as their own book, as their own monograph. And frankly, I would love that opportunity. And my next project actually is one of these chapters. My next project will be on Tejanos and World War Two, looking at both the home front and the military aspect of the Second World War. But the world we live in is the world of university publishing companies.

And they have to take things into account in terms of word count and page numbers and book length that makes it viable for publishing. So, I realized that when this chapter in its first draft was over 50 plus pages, and the World War Two chapter was closer to 80 pages, I had to whittle that down into one chapter instead of the two chapters it was originally. I realized that I needed to just kind of steamroll on through. And even though I deem a lot of the background information of what's going on in Texas, what's going on in the nation, in terms of like trying to encapsulate like what the mood is along the border, as opposed to in Austin, I had to be decisive. Know, you have to become surgical in how you approach like, the information, the platform, and the description of what is going on.

So, it's painstakingly tedious, but it can be done.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. Well, let's jump right into the episode, and we're talking about this transition into the twentieth century. And this you start off your chapter initially with you using the word I do believe he used the word woes, I think something like that, but just how challenging it is for

Tejanos in this initial changeover from the Spanish American war, some of the challenges we talked about at the end of last episode, about how there was a lack of trust on the border with for Anglos towards what Tejanos were doing related to the Spanish-American war just because of the challenges associated with that war. But then things get really, really difficult and challenging for these folks on the border. Help walk us through those shifts and those changes and the key pieces.

I think there's an economic piece, there's also a piece on immigration, and just how this- what's changing here at the turn of the twentieth century that has made life pretty rough and challenging for these folks?

Okay, so tell us about how the transition in the twentieth century is, especially in the aspects of economy and immigration, are impacting the lives of Tejanos on the border, and that will have a big impact on how they're viewed and how their experience of World War I?

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. I think that there are three big transitional changes coming to Texas at the turn of the twentieth century. One of those is just economics. Texas is moving from becoming, from being an agrarian state, a rural state, into one that is modernized, thanks to the railroads. So that's the first element.

Now, associated with that, obviously a spindle top, oil, the automobiles on the horizon, but related to what it means for Tejanos, it means that even though their job skills are required further up north away from South Texas, it also means that their prime land in South Texas is now plum for the taking as commercial farming comes into the mix. So economically, there's a lot of things changing. Of course, minimal job wages is something that the Tejanos are always going to have to deal with. In large part, their population is still going to have to also recognize that they're not going to earn a lot of money. They're still going to live in poverty for the most part. So that's the one big change.

The second big change is immigration. In our last episode, we spoke about Porfirio Diaz, and the beginning of his dictatorship in the 1880s. Well, his dictatorship ends in 1910. So once that ends, it throws Mexico into a civil war, the Mexican Revolution, which lasts a decade. What that transpires in terms of Texas is an influx of immigration as Mexicans flee the revolutionary country and come to Texas to seek refuge, to seek a better life. And they're grouped in these larger growing numbers of Tejanos and Mexicanos, and they're all going to be lumped in as a potential threat. Again, disloyal, they're not assimilated, they're not Americanized. And this is something that is obviously evident in Texas, but it's also part of the national fabric. Because in the 1910 census, and this is one of the things that alarmed the Woodrow Wilson administration by the time we hit World War I.

In the 1910 census, it was revealed that one out of every three Americans was either foreign born or second generation. So that means that they didn't speak English, they didn't really adapt to the assimilation ideas that many had envisioned. And this goes full bore in terms of European

immigrants, Asian immigrants across the country. So, this was something that the nation, that the authorities in Washington DC found very alarming. So that's the second biggest shift.

And I think the third biggest challenge that Tejanos have during this time period revolves around just how they had to take that stain of disloyalty and perceived disloyalty, and how it's exacerbated politically, because they had always worked with the idea of accommodation. They had always been able to vote, and they had always been able to at least choose their own politicians, their own leaders. But beginning the twentieth century, you have two big blows to the Tejano community voting, as well as poor whites and African Americans, and that is the poll tax, which hit everyone full bore. And the idea of being able to vote and have to pay for it is going to disfranchise a big segment of the population. The white primary too in Texas is going to deal a heavy blow to Tejanos voting.

So this is going to last all the way into the midpoint of the twentieth century, and this becomes concerning because that whole policy of accommodation no longer is going to be able to transpire like it normally had been.

Steve Sisson: And because they don't have political wherewithal, right, at this point, they don't have the political power to be able to make, to vote or have, make changes. Their land is being taken while the railroads are coming through. So much is changing in this window that it makes it really, really hard for them to be recognized at all as a people. Plus, they're at this point, are there ways in which they're fighting back? Are there ways in which they're or are they sort of being steamrolled and forced into these situations?

Like, how are they responding? Are they, in what ways are they managing this in this, like, 1910 to 1917 period?

Alex Mendoza: They're trying to fight back. And we have some of the few Tejanos politicians that are urging restraint on the Texas Rangers, will touch back again JT Canales, one of the local state leaders is trying to have hearings to kind of highlight the problems associated with the Rangers organization. And we need to always make that distinction that the Rangers organization of the early twentieth century, the way back to the Texas revolutionary time period, it's not the modern law enforcement agency that we know of today. It's basically practical outlaws that are free to deem you know, retribution as they see fit. There is personality.

There is conflicts, conflicts of interest. So, they are trying to fight back. But as you allude to, I mean, they're just facing overwhelming numbers, and the sheer fact that they are still a minority, even though their numbers in Texas, as per the 1910 census, has them at right over 120,000 people, still less than 10% of the population. So they really can't factor in as much as they want to make an imprint. They're really not able to factor in much change at this time.

Steve Sisson: And then this leads to the *La Matanza*, which I don't remember from my history classes in Texas history, help us unfold this tragic stain on Texas and American history. Like,

what is going on during this window of time? Obviously, you've laid out why some of this is happening for them, but what is this?

Alex Mendoza: *La Matanza* is, and loosely translated it, is the killing or the killings. And it refers to a period from 1910 to roughly the World War I period, 1910 to 1917, in which extra-legal lynchings took place under the auspices of law enforcement, bandits coming in from Mexico, and just sheer wherewithal of trying to maintain law and order on the border. What it actually came from is that the Texas Rangers organization basically were hired guns for these commercial farming interests that looked to displace the Hano families from the border, the Brownsville area, the way up close to Laredo, and also like around the El Paso area. So those people who had lived there for generations were on prime property. And the Rangers organization and other law enforcement entities just did not distinguish between real Mexican bandits coming in during the Mexican revolutionary spillover.

One of these is exacerbated by the Pancho Villa raid into New Mexico in 1916. So what it came down to *La Matanza* was just extra-legal lynchings killings. And what we normally think of lynchings in the modern context is death by hanging. But lynching is death by any means. And one of the things that often happened is people were shot in the back, people were accused of being a bandit when they were not, and they just were simply run over, simply shot, simply killed, and in some cases, of course, simply hanged.

And this was symptomatic of Texas and the rest of the Jim Crow South throughout the turn of the twentieth century. And there's a lot of lynchings. Obviously, African American lynching takes precedence. But *La Matanza*, and we don't know exact numbers. Historians like Monica Munoz Martinez over at UT Austin has done extraordinary work trying to chronicle and trying to bring attention to these killings.

But a conservative estimate has them at roughly hundreds of Tejanos being hanged, killed, lynched during this time period, when far more reaching numbers, like close to 4,000 to 5,000, could be more accurate as well. But we don't know because everything was brushed aside and just moved along, like there was nothing to see. So, thanks to the help of Monica Munoz Martinez, who has her own website, which we will link to at one point, refusing to forget, she has been instrumental in trying to bring attention and historical markers to many of the Tejanos who have been wrongfully murdered along this time period.

Steve Sisson: I used to live in Kyle, Texas, outside of San Antonio, outside of Austin, and I lived in front of a house that had this three fifty year old live oak out in front, and they called it the Auction Oak. Down the street was another tree called the hanging tree in Kyle that does not have as much more of a painful association. So I know just from the historical data that I knew about the tree that I lived, that I was responsible for taking care of and being aware of, it's just crazy that that's part of our history, right, how that works. And I looked that website up, it's fantastic. What a great record and what a way to remember, right, as we talk about memory and how memory and history are put together.

There's this podcast, there's other ways in which we can remember. How do we transition? Let's break down a little bit more about the Texas Rangers in whatever depth you feel is appropriate for this particular window, just because they're a part of our of Texas history in such a strong and obvious way. But what are, at this point in time, as we think about the Tejanos that are going to basically think about whether they're going to apply for the draft, they're going to be drafted, right? Or they're going to run away, which is something that we'll be talking about and breaking down.

What's going on with the *La Matanza* and also this idea of the Texas Rangers. How's this playing in? How does this transition into their trust the way that the US may, Anglos may not be trusting them? What are they thinking about what opportunities are going to be available to them in their futures?

Alex Mendoza: Certainly, it's funny you mentioned the topic of memory, because I also teach like a sports history class at the university. And a historian, much brighter than I, came way before me and offered this general analysis of how Texas's identity changed right around its centennial, right around 1936, one hundred years of celebration. And prior to 1936, right around this time period, Texas still considered itself part of the Confederate South, part of the Old South. Texas considered itself Southern. But after 1936, Texas adopted a new and unique identity, which is not Southern, it's not Western, it's more Southwest.

And many of these professional sports teams kind of adopted that imagery. I mean, obviously, I live just close to the Texas Rangers and we've talked about their organization and their nod to history with the Texas Ranger statue that just popped up a couple of months ago. But Texas also has the Cowboys, the Desperados, San Antonio has the Spurs. You know, before the late 1990s, the Houston Astros were the Colt 45s, two guns that just demonstrated that outlaw mentality. So, the Texas Rangers organization, right around this time period, was part of this rough and tumble frontier style heritage that Texas adopted as part of its own in the 1930s.

So that's why trying to get at the root level of what the Texas Rangers organization meant to Hispanics, to Tejanos, to Mexican Americans is really a tough nut to crack, because there's an overwhelming layer of glossed memory. The Lone Ranger in modern you know, popular culture the idea of *Walker: Texas Ranger*, who recently died, Chuck Norris, put that into the national lexicon of, like, great supposed heroes. So, during this time period, the Texas Rangers organization basically ran roughshod over Tejanos. And they were seen as a terrorist organization by Hispanic groups along the border, because the Rangers organization was there to murder, to basically abuse the rights of Tejanos, right and left. And in large part, this time period that you're talking about this history that we have to reckon ourselves with you talk about the hanging tree.

Texas has public spectacles in terms of hangings. You know, Waco had 5,000 people turn out for the hanging of an African American boy, a teenager Jesse Washington, and they all posed for a photo. So there are photos that we have, thanks to Monica Munoz Martinez, who points out Texas Rangers in front of supposed Mexican bandits. There is photographic evidence of

many of these state dairy queens as to how they were once nodding to the past and in a very, very morbid way. So *La Matanza* these killings that we may never know the exact numbers, but we know are substantial.

Well, the Texas Rangers organization is part of that in its entirety. I mean, they're complicit.

Steve Sisson: Yes. There's no doubt about it. So let's transition into World War I and follow some of these characters, but as we follow them, we need to set the stage for how, what shifted from with the Spanish American War, there was a situation in which people were all volunteers and they had to pay their own way and they brought their own weapons, but now because of the size of this war and the way that we get into it and the number of people that need to be able to be transported all the way to the old country back to France where most of this war is being battled, Help us unpack that a little bit about, how that's going to impact our Tejanos who are thinking about joining the military, because things shift here in terms of why they join the military and what their roles are in the military.

Alex Mendoza: Most certainly, I think that the biggest change that's going to happen is going to happen in due part to the Mexican press, the Spanish language press. And let me kind of encapsulate like, what I mean by that. One of the things that Texas often forgets is that up until the World War I period, I mean, Texas was Anglo, German, Mexican and African American. And there were like three major newspaper entities. I mean, was the German language press, the Spanish language press, and obviously the English language press.

And the Spanish language press operated from San Antonio, El Paso, all the way down to the Rio Grande Valley. And they are the proponents of mobilizing the Tejanos population. And this is due in large part to all those Mexican immigrants who had come in during the *Porfiriato*, the Diaz regime. So they are instrumental in terms of figuring out that after the Spanish American war, after the Tejano loyalties were called into question, you had the double whammy of the poll tax and the white primary to strike a blow against the Tejano voting rights. So what begins to happen is segregation.

You know, we know things as Jim Crow in the Old South, but in Texas, you have Juan Crow laws being passed, where all of a sudden there's no distinction being made between elite Tejanos and working Tejanos and Mexicans. At this point, it's just full bore, no Spanish allowed. And this is something that is going to resonate all the way up to the mid-twentieth century. So I think what the Spanish language press figures out is that they need to cooperate. They need to promote more distinct layer of loyalty of Americanism, in order to keep the pressures off the community, the Tejanos community.

And as a consequence of this, they will be instrumental in at least swaying people to not panic and not run away and not resist the draft. Because at this time when the call for 1,000,000 to register for the draft, and this is unprecedented. I mean, the Civil War had a draft, both the Confederacy and the Union, but it was tepid in comparison to what the modern World War I period will demand and require. And this is something that the Spanish language press will be

instrumental in pushing the Tejanos population to not panic and just try to remain neutral, to try to run away, to try to flee back into Mexico.

Steve Sisson: Yeah, those options aren't available anymore, basically. It's either you are no longer in America and you leave the country, or you are forced into I mean, they don't have a choice because otherwise they're being killed anyway. You know, to me, if I think about it if I'm a young male Tejanos in Laredo in 1917, how am I going to trust if I'm going to get conscripted that what's going to happen? Because I've just been dealing primarily with people watching all of my friends and family being killed indiscriminately with no recourse, so I can definitely sense how there would be a lot of fear related to making this step. However, if they don't make this step, there's really not there it it's not going to get better.

Right?

Alex Mendoza: Well, certainly. But human nature is what it is, and people were still afraid. There were reports. I mean, people kept an eye on those international bridges from Laredo all the way down to Brownsville, and they noticed. They noticed traffic being heavier leaving Texas.

You know, during the first stages of, there's three waves of enlistments, registration drives. And people noticed the exodus in Texas, and the Spanish language press was instrumental in trying to keep that at bay as best as they could, reassuring Spanish readers that this was not tantamount to kidnapping, that this was not going to be anything that they would deem unnecessary, that this was going across the entire country. And I think one my favorite quotes from this time period is Laredoan, who's a newspaper editor who was once accused of disloyalty himself. He's got the quote, and he says, "We need to support this country, for our own best interests." I mean, this is a reality.

They have to do this for themselves to try to make that transition into at least the viability of being citizens. That is the goal, to be recognized as citizens.

Steve Sisson: So what is the op, so when a young man is deciding whether it is being drafted, what is going on in this window in terms of how that experience goes? Like, it's the first time that this has happened for this generation, for sure. And so how are they responding, and what are the reasons for joining the war effort? Why are they not running away? I mean, in one way you're saying if you don't assimilate, you will need to leave, but in another way, there's an opportunity here, right?

Or a perceived opportunity.

Alex Mendoza: And we're going to see the full gamut of like responses. One historian actually said it best, he said, Tejanos resistance to the draft is no better and no worse than what's going on across the country, because everyone is freaking out about this. Everyone is surprised, nobody wants to go enlist. You got to remember that Woodrow Wilson in 1916 campaign on the platform, he kept us out of war. So this is not exactly a war that people can relate to.

I mean, there's no Pearl Harbor, there is no USS *Maine* at the bottom of a harbor. This is something like freedom of the seas that is intangible, the Zimmerman telegram. I mean, things are not as concrete as the authorities in Washington, DC would suggest. But the options that are available there are available to anyone. You could just run away.

You could feign ignorance. You could just choose not to report, to even be registered for the draft. And certainly, we're going to see this. I mean, we have newspaper reports of Tejanos being captured, trying to make their way to the border that were registered for the draft. We'll have people insist on giving immigrants that are here illegally the option join up and fight or be deported, and some are going to choose to fight.

And we're going to see, like, a completely different paradigm also being thrown into the mix, where now we're looking at second or third generation Tejanos who have assimilated, who have recognized a love for this nation, despite all its warts, despite the problems, despite the inequities, they do love this country, and they owe everything to this country. So they are going to join, for lack of a better word, just for loyalty and American pride.

Steve Sisson: Patriotism. Yeah. So let's talk a bit about some of these characters, these gentlemen who are fighting in the war and their experience. They have to basically get trained for an extended period of time, and then they're getting shipped across an ocean, which is not an easy and quick transition.

They spend a good bit of time on a boat, and then they're thrown into a war situation, but a war situation in which they're not trained for because they've been trained for a different kind of war based on General Pershing's vision of what he was going to do from a war perspective. Then when they get to France, the French commanders are entrenched in their old way of fighting, a way that's not the Pershing method. I just think about these gentlemen and thinking how they've been trained. They have to pick up new rifles and operate with new rifles and it's a crazy transition, you know?

Alex Mendoza: Well, speaking of crazy transitions, one of the things that enlistees, like Tejanos, are going to have to reckon with is that this is going to give the Wilson administration the perfect opportunity, or the federal government that is, to assimilate by force those that have not assimilated already. And again, this was a warning to the authorities in Washington, D. C. One out of every three Americans are not born in The United States, or just first, second generation. So before they even get to train with real weapons, and we'll get to the real weapons or lack thereof, I mean, of horses even, the Tejanos are going find themselves fighting or pretending to fight with like wooden rifles because not enough had been shipped to them.

There's not enough horses, so they're trying to learn how to ride a saddle on a wooden horse at one point. But before they even get to any actual physical and military training, they're going to be taught English. They're going to be taught, like many of the progressive ideals, this is the

progressive time period, morality. Americans are trying to reform the unwashed and the unclothed. So they're trying to convince them that drinking is bad, that sexual behavior is poor.

They're trying to instill all these ideas of Victorian culture in the early part of the twentieth century. So what becomes imperative is Tejanos, for their part, are all of a sudden being taught English. You know, they're being taught about the wonders of American democracy. They're being taught about the beauty of American government. I mean, so you have several hours each day, and there's an actual section of the US Army the foreign speaking soldiers', subsection of the US Army that is designing lessons, and they're using *National Geographic* magazines to try to teach these soldiers how to read and write.

So that's the first blow that the Tejanos get. Like all of a sudden, they're in a school when they didn't think they had to be ready for school. So that's the first blow. Then the second blow that they get is they're going to be trained in a way of war that is largely not consistent with the European reality of war. And what General John J. Pershing, Black Jack Pershing has is this belief that the American way of war is one on mobility, speed, quickness of movement. He's thinking of things still like in the nineteenth century, but Europe has been engaged in a war of attrition for the last three years. So essentially, they're in trenches. They're not moving.

Lines move maybe a few 100 yards every few weeks. Soldiers remain living in trenches, always under the barrage of artillery fire, machine guns. I mean, rapid movement. I mean, horses are on the way out. I mean, tanks, airplanes, bombs, this is what's the future. Also, poison gas, this is the reality of European style of warfare. So what the Europeans won, what the Allies of The United States actually hoped for, was manpower. They have the weapons, but they need the manpower. And one of the biggest challenges is what sort of independence The United States was going to have once they got to Europe. Will they be fighting as an independent US Army, US Armed Forces Force, or will they be incorporated into preexisting French units or British units?

And this is actually kind of delays the American entry into this conflict. I mean, The US declared war on Germany in April 1917, but it's not going to be till almost a year later till actual soldiers see the front lines just because of the training, the delays. And then once they get to Europe, they have to relearn everything they've learned in the States, and try to incorporate the idea that this is how you put on a gas mask. This is how you live in a trench for the next x number of weeks or months. So it's like a whole new way of thinking.

Steve Sisson: But we do have some heroes, This is the first chance, the first opportunity really where the Tejanos are recognized for their bravery, their actual battle performances. So let's go through two of these heroes of World War One from the Tejano perspective.

Alex Mendoza: I think the most fascinating one and indicative of the time period is Laredo and San Antonio native, David B. Cantu. And he is born to an Anglo father, hence the name Barkley. And his mother's a Tejana, a Mexican from Laredo, by the name of Cantu. So when he grows

up in San Antonio, after a few years, he recognizes that his Hispanic, his Tejano identity is a hindrance.

And this is corroborated, by and large. I mean, for example, we have records of Jose de la Luz Saenz, the only Tejano to write a full-scale memoir, over 300 pages, of his experiences. And this is a college educated Tejano who always believed that he never got to be joining the ranks of the officer corps only because of his heritage. I mean, he was dark complected, his name could not be shifted. And he pointed out that he always believed that it was prejudice and discrimination that kept him from advancement.

So because of that, David B. Cantu just kept his ethnic identity on the down low. And he refused to acknowledge that he was Hispanic. And he even urged his mother, according to some accounts, to not use her last name or to not refer to him as Cantu in any of her correspondence to him because he did not want to upset the apple cart at this point. But when he gets to Europe, when he engages in fighting, he will become the very first Congressional Medal of Honor recipient who is of Hispanic descent. But we don't know about his native origin until the 1980s, till they dug through the records and finally figured out, like, wait a second, he was actually Hispanic.

But what he did is he and another soldier, basically at the end of the war, November 1918, right as the war is about to come to a conclusion, they volunteer for a reconnaissance mission. They have to swim across the Meuse River. They have to provide reconnaissance as to the enemy troop dispositions, enemy troop movements, and they make it across the river. And on the way back, only one makes it through, David Barkley Cantu perishes. He dies; he drowns.

The other soldier gets on through, they have their records, they have the information necessary for the last few weeks of the war. But he is awarded his medal posthumously. But more significantly is that it takes decades before his real ethnic identity is revealed. And his likeness is actually the one used for the very first Congressional Medal of Honor statue in Laredo for all Hispanics. It's a sculpture of a bronze sculpture of a World War one soldier with bayonet attached to his rifle, lunging ahead.

And the idea behind it was to pay homage to all Hispanic congressional medal of honor recipients. And that is, like, one of the very unique stories of the First World War.

Steve Sisson: And then another character, he also perishes in the war, but also he doesn't gain this critical Congressional Medal of Honor, though he does receive all the other honors that are afforded to many of the people who fought heroically. Tell us a little bit about Marcelino Serna.

Alex Mendoza: Marcelino Serna is truly fascinating, but he didn't die during the war.

Steve Sisson: Okay.

Alex Mendoza: He lives to be 92 years old in El Paso. But I think his story epitomizes the whole immigrant saga that can actually be translated to the modern-day era. Because he comes into El Paso from Mexico illegally. He's not a citizen. And what he does is, many manual laborers, he kind of picks up work on the railroads.

El Paso had Smeltertown as one of the locations for Mexican Americans to kind of find work. But he kind of bounces around the American Southwest and goes to the Denver area at one point where he is arrested. And he's given a choice, a very clear distinction, either you serve in the army or you go back to Mexico. At this point, for Serna, the distinction was pretty clear. You know, he's going to join the army and maybe use that as an opportunity for citizenship.

And he takes advantage of that. But what really catapults him to notoriety, to fame, is that he, again, also like towards the tail end of the war, he single-handedly kills over two dozen German soldiers and captures another two dozen that were hiding out in a trench towards the tail end of the war. And more importantly, I think, is that when soldiers at this stage of the war reveal some of their deeper demons and want to execute those German soldiers, Serna intervenes and stops them from just shooting them indiscriminately saying, hey, this is not who we are as soldiers this is against the rules and the conduct of war. So he is given every distinction French distinction, Italian distinction, but no Congressional Medal of Honor. People suggest that because of his origins he was not afforded that luxury.

And for him, it didn't matter. He didn't really care much about that award. He got citizenship in the 1920s. He got married to his longtime girlfriend, had six kids, worked as a plumber in El Paso for decades, up until his death, at the age of 90. And it's important for us to kind of note that during the administration of Barack Obama, he passed legislation to try to figure out, like, who was left out of the Congressional Medal of Honor from past wars, based discrimination, based on ethnic identities that might have kept some referrals when going up the chain of command.

And the Serna family, the descendants of the Serna family, championed Marcelino Serna. I mean, this is a man who was very, very well respected. I mean, even a Border Patrol station was named after him in the twentieth century. But for some reason, and they never reveal what exactly happens, but there was an article printed right when I was finishing up the last stages of writing this book in 2025, when the Biden administration had his portfolio, and they didn't act on it. You had champions in the Texas legislature urging that Serna get a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor, but no action was taken at all.

And that's one of the travails of awards like this.

Steve Sisson: So, wrapping up this chapter and wrapping up this episode, let's talk a little bit about the impact. And we've been carrying this theme and this thread of memory through, and how we remember and how folks are remembered, whether it is by awards and honors like you're talking about, but we've had a thread through here of statues, and the University of Texas' the University of Texas', our alma mater, which has brought us together in terms of the

way that they're how we memorialize World War I, and how basically Hispanics and Tejanos are eliminated from this. They're not given the same level of recognition that their Anglo counterparts have. And so talk a little bit about this impact, and just this idea again, tracing this idea of memory as we close out this episode.

Alex Mendoza: Oh, absolutely. As far as our alma mater, I mean, in the 1920s, this proliferation of recognizing World War I veterans, you've got to remember that before it was World War I, it was known as the Great War. The war to end all wars. So people thought that was going to be it. Can't get any worse than that.

So there was this proliferation to kind of recognize and memorialize veterans, statues, monuments throughout the country. And at our alma mater in 1924, they erected a stadium, and the student body at UT all chose to name it Memorial Stadium in honor of World War I veterans. And to this day, there is a statue, very similar to the David Barkley Cantu statue, life size, on a pedestal of a World War I soldier with a rifle in his hand basically lunging forward. There is a plaque behind him with all the veterans, from Texas that kind of perished in this war, also to recognize him. And this stood tall from the 1920s for over eighty years until university officials chose to add Darryl K. Royal's name to Memorial Stadium.

Steve Sisson: In front of Memorial Stadium, yes.

Alex Mendoza: Yes, Daryl K. Royal Memorial Stadium.

Steve Sisson: Yeah, it's crazy. There are also some other really amazing things that come out of this period of time for Tejanos in terms of civil rights and organizations and a recognition that becoming American is a goal, right? That there's a benefit here that hadn't been really available. Whether that benefit is real or not real is another question, but there is a big change from what we've been seeing in other war situations at this point.

Alex Mendoza: I think it's more of a monumental change, not a big change. But what World War one had forced Tejanos into I mean, they were forced to learn English. They were forced to learn about politics and government and democracy, but they were also, in many cases, forced to learn new skills. I mean, they became mechanics. They became plumbers.

I mean, they learned skills in the army that chances are they would not have been given credit for in another avenue. So many of those came back and chose to use those skills to their own best interests. And the aforementioned Jose de la Luz Saenz, the educator from Alice, who believed that he had been affronted, and other Tejanos leaders like him, veterans of World War I, who were well educated, part of the middle class, they chose to create an organization to protect the civil rights. So a decade after World War One, these Tejanos leaders went to Corpus Christi and organized the creation of LULAC, the League of United Latin American Citizens. And they were going to champion the cause of Mexican Americans and disfranchisement and social and political inequities.

But contrary to years past decades and generations ago, what they were going to emphasize from this point forward is assimilation, American ideals, and English. So you had to toe the party line. If you were going to join this organization, you had to become more in line with the assimilation in Americanization than ever before, because this is the path that they chose to make their way into the mainstream. So World War I is a watershed in many respects, because it's going to turn into an opportunity to obtain civil justice, civil rights. It's going to afford them the opportunity to organize and assimilate, more importantly, be better prepared for World War II.

And as Spanish language newspapers go on the wane, just like German language newspapers, they're going to use this as an opportunity to galvanize the Tejanos population into moving into becoming mainstream citizens more and more. It does not mean to reject your culture, but to recognize where you live and partake in the government of which you live in and are a citizen of. So this becomes rather crucial, and this organization is obviously going to play an instrumental role by the World War II era and beyond, of course.

Steve Sisson: Yeah, well that's a great way to transition into World War II, which we'll cover in our next episode. Thank you again. We were worried that we would have a hard time getting through all this, and I think we did a pretty good job. So do you feel like there's anything else you need to touch on here that would be important for people to recognize relative to World War I?

Alex Mendoza: I think that we covered the main gist of it. Of course, we talked only about two heroes. There are several more. There are so many that we could actually just go down to various rabbit holes. But I think that looking at World War I as a watershed moment, and as the beginning of Tejano activism in terms of civil rights, this is going to be crucial for us to understand what happens at the midpoint of the twentieth century.

Steve Sisson: That's great. Thank you, Alex, for another history lesson, and we appreciate your knowledge and your sharing it with us in this podcast, and we'll meet everybody next time as we jump into World War II. Thank you.

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. Thank you.