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'Escuelitas' rose out of a response to segregated Mexican schools

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Leonor Villegas de Magnón's kindergarten class from 1913. Aside from being an educator, Villegas de Magnón was a suffragist. Photo: Courtesy Webb County Heritage Foundation

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Philis Barragán Goetz is a scholar attempting to build new ground in Mexican American educational history.

While many have studied Mexican Americans in public education, none have written extensively about the little-known role of *escuelitas*.

Spanish for “little schools” or preschool, *escuelitas* rose up in the Southwest from about the 1880s to shortly after World War II.

Run mostly by women, untrained as teachers, they taught Spanish literacy, Mexican history and sometimes English proficiency. Some paid tuition, other children attended for free.

Their curriculum was a direct reaction to segregated Mexican schools, where pupils were forbidden from speaking Spanish, and their history was either excluded by the curriculum, or demeaned by its teachers.

In such times, Barragán Goetz says Mexican and Mexican American parents were “asserting agency” in organizing *escuelitas* to fill the gaps in schooling and build pride among their children.

The key to her research rests in finding ex-students. Some might be in San Antonio. They'd be in their 80s now, and probably attended escuelas on the city's West and South Sides.

Barragán Goetz, 34, who teaches history at UTSA and is a doctoral student in American Studies at the [University of Texas at Austin](#), became interested in these schools by way of two extraordinary women who appear in the research that does exist: Jovita Idar and [Leonor Villegas de Magnón](#), suffragists who were part of the escuela movement.

In a handful of interviews so far, Barragán Goetz has found people with lasting memories of their escuelas. "One gentleman I interviewed in Mercedes said there were 60 students in one house, and his teacher, Profesor Cuellar took a chair, put it on top of a table and would read La Prensa of San Antonio aloud," she said.

"The interesting thing about these escuelas is that they are everywhere and, at the same time, nowhere in the historical record," she says.

She has found glimmers of hope. Villegas de Magnón had her students photographed, and those pictures are held by the [Webb County Heritage Foundation](#).

Ultimately, the scholar is hoping to tell a larger story about "the rise and proliferation of these escuelas as a way for the Mexican child to help adults come to terms with the fact that neither country could, or would, provide their community with decent schools, or a pathway to a middle-class livelihood."

Children, she says, were "at the center of these negotiations," still a critical mission in Latino communities.

No full-length text exists on these Mexican American escuelas, but lucky for us Barragán Goetz aims to write one. If you can help, email her at escuelitaproject@gmail.com.

eyayala@express-news.net

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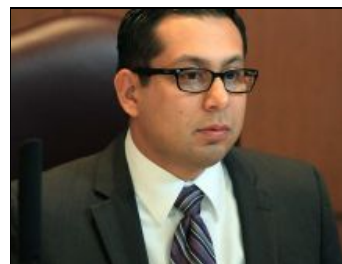
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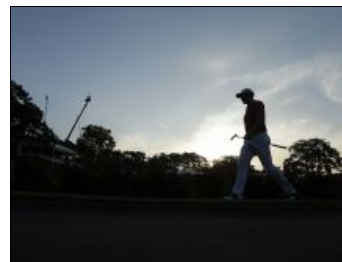
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