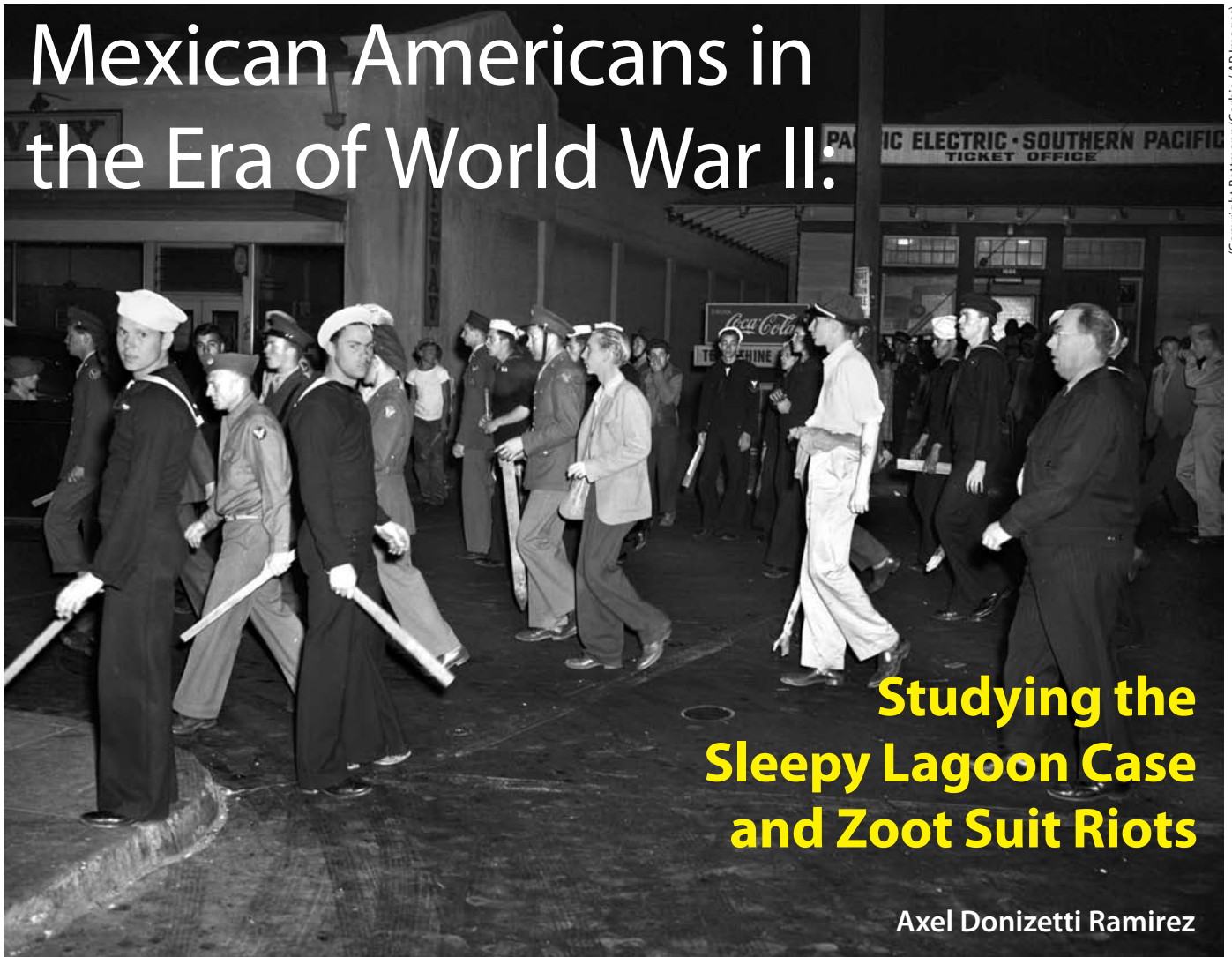


Mexican Americans in the Era of World War II:



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Studying the Sleepy Lagoon Case and Zoot Suit Riots

Axel Donizetti Ramirez

Armed with clubs, pipes, and bottles, a group of uniformed men in Watts, California, was set to settle the Zoot Suit War when the Navy Shore Patrol stepped in and broke it up, June 11, 1943. The angry servicemen were out to get all wearers of oversize clothing to avenge buddies who were attacked.

When I was growing up in East Los Angeles my mother told me about the “classy” gangsters of East L.A. who wore Zoot Suits. These stories made me interested in the concept of “gangs” and whether there was anything favorable that could be learned by studying their history. Through research, I learned that the Zoot Suiters were much more than well-dressed Latinos: they had a sense of honor and pride and exhibited class under adverse circumstances.

In August of 1942, José Díaz, a 22-year-old Mexican American, was murdered near a popular swimming hole known as Sleepy Lagoon. The ensuing investigation and press hysteria fueled racial tensions and ultimately led to the Zoot Suit Riots in June of 1943. On the evening of June 3, sailors and Zoot Suiters got into a fight near a Venice, California, dance hall. Word spread through the military barracks that Mexican gang members

had attacked the sailors. Hundreds of military men swarmed the barrios of Los Angeles. For the next two weeks, throngs of servicemen would go out to beat up “Zooters.” Before long, angry, anti-Mexican civilians who had heard about the riots on the radio, also went around beating Zooters and stripping them of their clothing. After the first night, any young Mexican American, regardless of clothing, became a victim. Many rioters

also took out their frustrations on other minorities, especially African Americans. This madness continued for nearly two weeks before the military banned Los Angeles to members of the military.

I’ve now taught many Latino students about the Zoot Suiters and the Sleepy Lagoon Case and they have taken pride in their story. I hope your students, no matter their ethnic background, will also have this experience.

LESSON: Sleepy Lagoon Case and Zoot Suit Riots

Overview: The “choose your own ending” format provides a chance for students to experience a historical situation and then delve into the specifics of history. This story focuses on a young Mexican American living in East Los Angeles during World War II. Many of the incidents are taken from actual accounts of the Sleepy Lagoon Case of 1942 and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. As the students make choices, you may want to have them write down and reflect on their choices. All of the endings lead the student to an overview of the Sleepy Lagoon Case and Zoot Suit Riots.

The Choose-Your-Own-Ending Story of Young Pachuco

In this choose-your-own-ending story, you take on the character of a young Mexican American living in East Los Angeles during World War II. The story is based on actual events associated with the Sleepy Lagoon Case of 1942 and Zoot Suit Riots of 1943.

Step 1

Ever since the Japanese and Japanese Americans were sent off to relocation camps there has been increased hatred towards Mexican Americans in California. The newspapers call you a “pachuco” (paw-chew-ko), a name you once used with pride but which is now used in the press to refer to “young Mexican hoodlums.” The media has even taken your favorite outfit, the Zoot Suit, and transformed it into a symbol of crime and hatred. Those baggy pants, cuffed at the bottom, draped and pleated; those suits that made you look so fine, are now being used as a mark of how different you are. They make fun of you because you look so different from the boys going off to war. A lot of your friends have gone into the military. They say that in the military you are just like everyone else. However, if you go into the armed forces, who will take care of your family during this time of animosity?

If you decide to join the military, go to Step 2. If you decide to stay home, go to Step 3.

Step 2

Your mother does not want you to go into the Navy, but you know that it is the best choice for you. A middle-aged recruitment officer looks you over. “Son, I see you want to join. Are you sure it’s what you want to do?”

“Yes, I want to fight for my country.” The officer gives you a warm smile, and you feel like a first class citizen. You remember all those times that people called you names like “greaser” and “wet-back.” You remember how much you looked forward to Tuesdays because it was the only day that you could swim in the public pool. The sign at the swimming pool said, “Tuesdays Reserved for Negroes and Mexicans.” That’s why you always went swimming at the “Sleepy Lagoon,” a water-filled gravel pit.

The officer asks, “Have you ever been convicted of a crime?” You tell him that you have gone to jail a few times with your friends for stealing. You didn’t steal anything, but it hadn’t mattered to the police. You worry now that you might not get to join the Navy. However, they still accept you.

As you get home, you notice that most of the neighborhood boys are impatiently waiting for you.

“Hey, some of the Downey Boys came up to the Sleepy Lagoon to fight! We’re going to go finish it right now!”

In the distance, you hear music. It’s over at the Delgadillo Ranch. You know you should go home. It’s getting late and things haven’t been too safe lately for pachucos because of harassment by the police and, at times, American servicemen. However, all your friends are going to crash the party.

**If you go home, Step 6.
If you go to the Ranch, Step 7.**

Step 3

You want to fight for your country and let others see that you are American like them. However, you cannot leave your family. It is getting too dangerous for Mexican Americans. You remember that people call you names like “greaser” and “wet-back.” You remember how much you look forward to Tuesdays because it is the only day that you can swim in the public pool. The sign at the pool said, “Tuesdays Reserved for Negroes and Mexicans.” That’s why you go to the Sleepy Lagoon, a water-filled gravel pit.

You realize that the only way to change all this is to prove that you are a true American and join the Navy. They ask you to return and take your pledge in a month.

“Ay, Ma, I’ll be o.k. You worry too much. I’m going with the boys to the Sleepy Lagoon.” You put on your Zoot Suit and head out the door as your mother says a prayer for you.

As it gets dark, the Downey Boys, a local gang, start causing trouble. There are too many of them so you come back later with all of the boys. In the distance, you hear music. It is over at the Delgadillo Ranch. You know you should go home. However, all of your friends are going to crash the party and have a good time.

**If you go home, Step 4.
If you go to the Ranch, Step 5.**

Step 4

You go home to a sobering sleep. The next thing you know someone is shaking you.

"Yeah, this is one of them," an officer says. You hear your mother arguing with the police officer but he doesn't understand Spanish.

"Why are you doing this?" you yell.

You are answered with a question. "Do you hang around with the boys from 38TH street?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"You are going to jail for the murder of José Díaz. He was killed last night by you and your people."

"But, I wasn't with them," you protest. It doesn't matter, you are dragged off to the police station in your Zoot Suit from last night.

At the police station, you see the rest of the boys. Many of them are battered and bruised. You ask them about last night, but all they can tell you is that there was a fight.

They take you to a little room, alone, handcuffed to a chair, and surrounded by several police officers.

"You better tell us everything."

"How can I tell you something I don't know?" you reply nervously.

"If you don't talk, you'll be sorry. We know all about those other boys."

You defend your friends.

"You Lie!" the officer says as he hits you in the face. He knocks you over the chair to the floor. "Sit down!" he hollers. "You Mexicans think you are so smart. We ought to shoot every Mexican dog like you. Come on, tell us what happened."

"I don't know," you insist. The policeman hits you again. Then the cop behind you hits you and busts your mouth open.

"Come on, what happened!"

"I don't know!" you gasp.

"Give me some of that bushy hair." He grabs your hair and starts to beat you against the wall and kick you. "If you don't talk, I'm going to keep on hitting you in the eye!"

If you "talk," Step 8.

If you refuse to "talk," Step 9.

Step 5

The party is bigger than you thought.

Before you know it, you feel a crash on your head. Someone has hit you over the head with a beer bottle. Everything gets fuzzy. You manage to stagger outside, into a corner. All around you, everyone is fighting.

When you wake up, you're at the police station. You see the rest of the 38TH street boys, even the ones that didn't go to the ranch. You hear from the others that they are blaming your gang for the death of José Díaz. You see blood on your Zoot Suit but can't remember where it came from.

They take you to a little room, alone, handcuffed to a chair, and surrounded by several police officers.

One of them says, "You better tell us everything."

"How can I tell you something I don't know?" you say, confused.

"If you don't talk, you'll be sorry. We know all about the other boys."

You defend your friends.

"You Lie!" the officer shouts as he hits you in the face. He knocks you over the chair to the floor. "Sit down!" he hollers. You sit, only to be knocked down again. "You Mexicans think you are so smart. We ought to shoot every Mexican dog like you. Come on, tell us what happened."

"I don't know," you insist. The policeman hits you again. Then the cop behind you hits you and busts your mouth open.

"Come on, what happened!"

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"Give me some of that bushy hair." He grabs your hair and starts to beat you up against the wall and kicks you.

"If you don't talk, I'm going to keep on hitting you in the eye!"

If you decide to "talk," Step 8.

If you refuse to "talk," Step 9.



Original caption:

1943: ZOOT SUITS...

Zoot by any other name—
a patriot just the same.

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"Those baggy pants, cuffed at the bottom, draped and pleated; those suits that made you look so fine, are now being used as a mark of how different you are."

Step 6

You go home to a sobering sleep. The next thing you know, someone is shaking you awake.

"Yeah, this is one of them," an officer says.

You hear your mother arguing with the policemen, but they don't understand Spanish.

"Why are you doing this?" you yell.

You are answered with a question. "Do you hang around with the boys from 38TH street?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"You are going to jail for the murder of José Díaz. He was killed last night by you and your people!"

"But, I wasn't with them," you protest. It doesn't matter, you are dragged off to the police station in your Zoot Suit from last night.

At the police station, you see the rest of the boys. Many of them are battered and bruised. You ask them about last night, but all they can tell you is that there was a fight.

They take you into a small room to question you. They keep making you feel guilty with their questions. You keep telling them that you went home last night.

One of the officers yells, "You're gonna talk. You're not so tough around here!" He then hits you with his fist and calls you a "cholo [gangster]" and a "dirty Mexican."

The other police officers soon stop him. Later that afternoon, you are released, cleared of all charges, and sent home. Because of the abuse, you are not sure if you want to remain in the military.

If you stay in the military, Step 10.

If you leave the military, Step 11.

Step 7

The party is bigger than you thought.

Before you know it, you feel a crash on your head. Someone has hit you over the head with a beer bottle. Everything gets fuzzy. You manage to stagger outside and into a corner. All around you, everyone is fighting.

When you wake up, you are at the police station. You see the rest of the 38TH street boys, even the ones that didn't go to the ranch. You hear from the others that they are blaming your gang for the death of José Díaz. You see the blood on your Zoot Suit but can't remember where it came from.

They take you into a small room to question you. They keep making you feel guilty with their questions. You keep telling them that you passed out last night and didn't know what happened.

One of the officers yells, "You're gonna talk. You're not so tough around here!" He then hits you with his fist and calls you a "cholo" [gangster] and a "dirty Mexican."

The other police officers soon stop him. Later that afternoon, you are released and cleared of all charges and sent home. Because of the abuse, you are not sure if you want to remain in the military.

If you stay in the military, Step 10.

If you leave the military, Step 11

Step 8

You say yes to everything. The policeman then reads your confession back to you. You and your friends are being tried together for the death of José Díaz. The press is calling this the "Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case." During your trial, you are not allowed to change from the Zoot Suit you were wearing the night of the murder or cut your hair. There are no Mexican Americans on the jury. At one point, your lawyer asks the judge to please explain your rights to you; the judge replies, "I don't have the time."

The people that testify against you say that you were born to be a criminal. They say that since your ancestors, the Aztecs, were bloodthirsty people, you can't help the fact that you are violent. The jury finds you and 16 others guilty.² You are sentenced to five years to life, even though you can't remember what happened that night. Night after night, you are alone in your jail cell. You write various letters. One of them reads:

Let the people know that there is prejudice against the Mexicans and how the police treated us when we were arrested just because we were Mexican. But being born a Mexican is something we had no control over, but we are proud no matter what people think, we are proud to be Mexican-American boys. I joined the Navy in July of last year (1942). They didn't turn me down because I was Mexican, because we are needed to fight this war. I was told to return back to the Navy Station to take my pledge, but unfortunately I was arrested for this crime which I didn't have anything to do with or know of. When we were arrested we were treated like if we were German spies ... they didn't figure that we are Americans just like everybody else that is born in this country. Well, if I didn't get to join the Navy to do my part for my country, I am still doing my part behind these walls. I am buying Defense Stamps and going to volunteer to do some war work.³

Unfortunately, while you are in prison, sailors stationed in Los Angeles go out every night during the first two weeks of June to beat up "Zooters." The press calls these raids on your old neighborhood the "Zoot Suit Riots." You wonder if after all this the Navy will still want a Mexican American. You can't believe that men who will soon be off fighting for freedom overseas could be doing such things to their own countrymen. The following year, the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, a group of volunteers petitioning for you, wins in the District Court of Appeals. **Turn to Step 12**

Step 9

As the officer gets ready to hit you again, someone stops him. You look up and see a lady staring at you. When she comes over to try and help, the officers stop her and make her get out of the room. Later, she will not be able to testify on your behalf.

You are put on trial with 21 other boys. The judge does not let you change your clothes or cut your hair. He does not let your lawyer talk to you during the trial. The newspapers have taken your misfortune and labeled it as part of a Mexican crime wave. Your trial has been nicknamed the Sleepy Lagoon Case. You still don't know what happened that night.

The jury finds you guilty. You are sentenced to five years to life in prison for 1ST degree murder. Shortly after you enter prison, you hear that thousands of servicemen and civilians are running around L.A. beating up Zoot Suiters or any Mexican American. The press calls these events the Zoot Suit Riots. You wonder how long your people will be treated like this just because they look different. You write a letter to the head of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, a group of people that don't know you:

I am not wasting my time here, I am attending school and improving my English and Arithmetic. Also I am learning watch repairing [*sic*]. ...Trying to find the words and expressions to thank you for your efforts in behalf of myself and the rest of the boys makes me realize what a meager vocabulary I possess though I have the chance to prove to you by my actions that the many hours you have spent in our behalf won't have been in vain.⁴

Those hours were not in vain. After you've spent two years in jail, the appellate court finds all of the 38TH street boys innocent.⁵

Turn to Step 12

Step 10

While in the military, you are stationed in Los Angeles. You read about your friends in press reports about the Sleepy Lagoon trial. Seventeen of the 38th street boys are found guilty. The press talks about a Mexican crime wave in Los Angeles. Newspapers write that youth in Zoot Suits are taking over the town, robbing and beating up servicemen and their families. You know that this is all a lie, but there is nothing you can do.

In June, you hear that a group of Zoot Suiters attacked a small group of sailors. All around you sailors and marines are talking about going into town and beating up Zooters. You try and get out to warn your friends but your request for leave is denied. You hear on the radio that thousands of civilians have come out to help the military clean up the "Pachucos." After two weeks, the military declares Los Angeles off limits.

Once the riots are over, it was hard to see your fellow servicemen the same way. It took a long time to get over the feeling that you were not one of them. However, after being sent off to war, you start to accept one another as equals. Together, Mexican Americans and European Americans, return home to a hero's welcome in L.A. Mexican Americans returned as the most decorated ethnic group in the armed services, winning 17 Medals of Honor.⁶ Even though Mexican Americans made up only one-tenth of the population of Los Angeles, they were one-fifth of the casualties from the city.⁷ Proudly, you return home determined to make sure that something like the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and the Zoot Suit Riots never happen again.

Turn to Step 12

Step 11

You think about how you are going to tell the Navy you are quitting. You decide to go to the beach to clear your thoughts. At the beach, some sailors walk by. You hear someone shout, "There's one of those Zooters! Let's get him!"

You're quickly surrounded by men in white uniforms. You are defenseless as they beat you, cut off your clothing with a knife, and leave you naked and bruised on the beach.

At the recruitment office the next morning, you can't help but feel scared with all the uniforms around you. Everyone seems to be staring at you. You decide the only way to change their perceptions is by staying in the Navy and fighting for your country.

While you are off at war, your friends were found guilty in what the press labeled the "Sleepy Lagoon Murder Case." As the war goes on, hundreds of Zoot-Suiters get beaten by servicemen in Los Angeles in the "Zoot Suit Riots."

One day, while fighting, you are wounded in the shoulder and sent back home. You use your influence as a veteran to help the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee obtain another trial. This time the 38TH street boys are found not guilty and their sentences are reversed. You are there when, after two years, your friends return from prison. You all know there will be many more struggles ahead for your people.

Turn to Step 12

Step 12

Early in the 1940s, the Zoot Suit became an urban fad. Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, in particular, adopted it as “the” mode of dress.

The events surrounding the Sleepy Lagoon Case, including police brutality, racism, and judicial misconduct are historically accurate. The information about public swimming pools in some parts of Los Angeles during this time period is also historically accurate. One thing not mentioned is that often the pool was drained on the day Mexicans and African Americans used the pool.

As a result of the conviction, the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee was established in 1943 to protect the rights of the 38TH street boys. Some segments of the society responded to this by having the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee investigated by the House un-American Activities Committee. The leader of the Defense Committee, Cary McWilliams, was charged with heading a Communist Front organization and accused of having “Communist leanings” because he opposed segregation.

Due to the strong appeal on behalf of the young men, the Second District Court of Appeals reversed the lower court in a unanimous decision in 1944. The appeals court stated the judge had shown a clear bias during the trial and had violated the youths’ constitutional rights. The court declared that no evidence existed that linked any member of the 38TH street boys to the death of José Díaz.

Examples of media bias during the Zoot Suit Riots can be read as primary sources in the *LA Times* and *New York Times* archives.

Though the Sleepy Lagoon Case and Zoot Suit Riots brought national exposure to the plight of Mexican Americans in the city, the country soon became refocused on the war effort. It was another generation before Mexican American issues became front-page news again.

Discussion Questions

1. *Why did you make the choices you did? Were the consequences what you expected?*
2. *If you could change a part of the story, what would it be? Was this possible for the character in the story?*
3. *What constitutional safeguards are in place today to prevent such abuses? Could parts of the story still happen today?*

Extended Research Activities

1. Research the role of Mexican Americans or other minority groups in the U.S. military during World War II.
2. Research forms of established discrimination in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s (employment, housing, military, the media, etc.).
3. Research the origin of the Zoot Suit. Why did people tend to adopt such fads? In 1943, the Zoot Suit was banned in Los Angeles. What are three other items of clothing that have been banned? Why was this done?

Note to Teachers: In the 1970s, a wonderful musical by Luis Valdez was produced. It is called *Zoot Suit*. The film version covers the Sleepy Lagoon Trial and Zoot Suit Riots. While I enjoy watching it, I do not feel that it is appropriate for secondary students because, though the musical is in English, there is much offensive language in Spanish that would easily earn an R rating. However, Valdez does a masterful job of artistically recreating the events of the Sleepy Lagoon Case and the Zoot Suit Riots; so students might be encouraged to view the musical with their parents—with an explicit warning about the language concerns. 🌐

Notes

1. Guy Endore, *The Sleepy Lagoon Mystery* (Los Angeles: *The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee*, 1944), 8.
2. *Ibid.*, 18, 20; Jones, Solomon James. *The Government Riots of Los Angeles, 1943* (Thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1969), 14.
3. Endore, 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 39.
5. The appellate court found the 38TH street boys innocent and reversed the decision because of (a) lack of evidence, (b) errors of bias by the judge, and (c) lack of proper access to legal counsel.

6. Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).
7. *Ibid.*

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