THE MEXICAN OUTSIDERS



A Community History of Marginalization and Discrimination in California

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THREE School Segregation

The Social Reproduction of Inequality, 1870 to 1934

By the early 1900s, most school boards in the United States practiced some form of institutionalized school segregation, and that functioned as the primary vehicle to maintain a segregated society (Feagin 1989). The targeted populations were Blacks, Asians, American Indians, and Mexicans. The rationales used by the school boards differed, but in general they were racial in origin. One of the main reasons school segregation was institutionalized was to ensure that racial minority groups would not come into contact with Anglo Americans (Hendrick 1977; Konvitz 1946; Menchaca and Valencia 1990). Scholars of school segregation propose that this racist practice was motivated by several factors. Its main impetus, however, was the belief that, if the children of the White and non-White races were not allowed to socialize in school, the groups would not intermarry, and thus the purity of the White race would be retained (Donato, Menchaca, and Valencia 1991; Gonzalez 1990; Weinberg 1977). In Santa Paula, the school administrators' intentions for segregating Mexican students are obscured because written accounts of their personal motives are not available. School board minutes containing this information have been discarded by the Santa Paula School District Office. Although the definitive rationales are not available, records do exist that delineate the history of school segregation in Santa Paula. These documents indicate that school segregation adversely affected Mexican students and this inequitable educational system was used to discriminate against them. The consequences of this schooling practice resulted in the provisioning of inferior education to Mexican students.

The purpose of this chapter will be to examine the foundation and institutionalization of the school segregation of Mexican students in Santa Paula and the consequences of this discriminatory practice. Although in Santa Paula the school segregation of Mexican students began in the late 1800s, and to this date has not

been dismantled, this chapter will focus on the period from the late 1800s to 1934. The contemporary school segregation of Mexican students will be examined in later chapters.

INTEGRATED ANGLO AMERICAN SCHOOLS BEFORE THE MEXICAN AMERICAN WAR

In Santa Paula, as in other California communities, when the first Anglo American pioneers settled in the Southwest, school segregation was not practiced. It was not until a few years after the Mexican American War, in 1855, that we find evidence indicating that in California the government required Whites and non-Whites to attend separate schools (Hendrick 1977). During the Mexican period, when the first Anglo American pioneers settled in California, it was an accepted practice for Mexican students to attend the Anglo American schools. Evidence of this is provided, for example, by the life history and memoirs left by Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell, who was the first schoolteacher of California and a resident of Santa Paula (Santa Paula School District Board of Trustees 1963; Webster 1967). A brief review of Mrs. Isbell's career as a schoolteacher will illustrate that the first school in California was racially integrated. Her life history will also be used to set the contextual background for the appearance of school segregation in Santa Paula.

The first Anglo American school in California was established in 1846, and Mrs. Isbell was hired to teach Anglo American, Mexican, and American Indian students (*VCHSQ* 1955). She arrived in California at the request of Colonel John C. Fremont and immediately established her school in the Santa Clara Mission de Assisi, near present-day San José. In her memoirs she wrote an account of the founding of her school, describing the school as follows:

> *My first teaching in California was commenced in the month of December 1846, in a room about 15 feet square, with neither light nor heat, other than that which came through a hole in the tile roof. The room was in the Santa Clara Mission, near San Jose. There most of the families that crossed the plains that year were housed by Colonel John C. Fremont. . . . We had only such books as we chanced to bring with us across the plains, and as superfluous baggage was not to be thought of, our stock of books was limited. I had about 20 scholars.* (VCHSQ *1955:1)*

Mrs. Isbell did not remain long in the Santa Clara Mission; within a few months she moved to Monterey, California. Her departure was prompted by the outbreak of the Bear Flag Rebellion that started at the mission and forced the Anglo Americans to leave. Following the rebellion, the Mexican American War of 1846 to 1848 broke out, and Anglo American settlers were forced to gather themselves in Monterey, where the United States government had set a military outpost. Hundreds of Anglo American settlers migrated to Monterey seeking refuge from the civil unrest caused by the war. While in Monterey, Mrs. Isbell was asked by the first American consul, Thomas O. Larkin, to reopen her school (Santa Paula School District Board of Trustees 1963; *VCHSQ* 1955; Webster 1967), so she opened a school house located on top of the city jail. Anglo American and Mexican students attended the school, with two-thirds of the students being of Mexican descent (Santa Paula School District Board of Trustees 1963; Webster 1967). Mrs. Isbell provides a written account of her remembrances of the schoolhouse in Monterey:

> *When our soldiers were disbanded, some five or six families moved to Monterey, California, where the first American consul, Thomas O. Larkin, engaged me to teach a three months term. They specially fitted up a room for me over the jail. I had 56 names enrolled, at $6 each for the term. Part of the scholars were Spanish and the other part the children of emigrants.* (VCHSQ *1955: 2)*

Two years after the Mexican American War ended, Mrs. Isbell and her husband, Dr. Issac Isbell moved to Texas, where she opened another school (Webster 1967). And in March 1872 they moved to Santa Paula, where they established permanent residence.[1] Upon her arrival at Santa Paula the residents asked Mrs. Isbell to be a teacher in one of their recently established schools. However, unlike the previous integrated schools that she had established, Santa Paula's schools were racially segregated.

EDUCATIONAL EXCLUSION OF MEXICAN STUDENTS: THE EARLY YEARS

When Mrs. Isbell arrived in Santa Paula in 1872, a private and a public school had already been founded. Neither school enrolled Mexican students, regardless of the fact that approximately half of the population

in town was Mexican (*VCHSQ* 1959; Santa Paula School District Board of Trustees 1963; Webster 1967). The location and the name of Santa Paula's first private school is unknown because classes were initially held in private residences and no schoolhouse was built. We do know, however, that lessons were first offered in 1870 and a permanent schoolhouse was established within a few years after classes began. The building was erected near present day Glen City School (Santa Paula School District Board of Trustees 1963; *VCHSQ* 1959). Eight Anglo American students were in attendance, and Mexicans were not enrolled. In 1872 or 1873 the first public school was established toward the West Side of Santa Paula, near the Anglo American settlements (Heil 1983). The school was named Briggs and was located in the northwest corner of Cummings and West Telegraph roads, far from where the Mexicans were residentially segregated. Approximately twenty Anglo American students were enrolled.

Why Santa Paula's Mexican students did not attend the Anglo American schools during the mid- to late 1800s is unclear. There is strong evidence, however, suggesting that state policies made it difficult for them to attend public school. In 1855, the California state legislature passed an educational law prohibiting school boards from using funds to educate non-White students (California Assembly Journal, 6th session, 1855, section 18:97–98, cited in Hendrick 1977). If any public school district was found enrolling non-Whites, the legislators could legally withhold state school funds. Public education was finally extended to non-White students in 1864, on the condition that they be instructed in separate schools apart from Whites (Hendrick 1977). This privilege, however, was not guaranteed. Parents of racial minorities first had to petition the state government of their intent, and then the local school board could initiate the process. If the petition was approved by the state, the school board was authorized to fund the school on the basis of the property taxes collected from non-White residents. Public revenues could not be collected from White citizens to fund the racial minority schools.

At that time the majority of the Mexican population of California was considered non-White and therefore subject to discriminatory school codes. In 1849, the first state congress discussed the racial status of the Mexican population and overwhelmingly agreed that Mexicans practiced a European culture but were genetically Indian. That same year, the state legislators passed a citizenship law differentiating Mexicans by racial ancestry and ascribing full citizenship rights only to White Mexicans (Donato, Menchaca, and Valencia 1991; Heizer and Almquist 1971; Menchaca 1993; Padilla 1979). Based on this legislation, Mexican mestizos and Mexican Indians were not entitled to be treated as White citizens and therefore were ineligible to receive full citizenship rights.

In the case of Santa Paula, exactly how state educational policies were implemented at the local level is unclear, but that they did contribute to the schooling exclusion of Mexican students is apparent. Three methods can be documented. First, based on state law, if Mexicans did not own property they were unable to establish a public school for their children because they were not qualified to receive government aid. Only if Mexicans could prove that their property base was sufficient to sustain the cost of funding a school would the state approve the construction of a public school for Mexicans. In Santa Paula, by 1902, only seven Mexicans owned property in town ("Original Assessment Book, City of Santa Paula, 1902–1908"). Obviously, their property taxes were insufficient to obtain state approval to fund a school. Second, in that the Mexican community of Santa Paula was ineligible to receive government funds to construct its own school, the only recourse the residents had was to send their children to private school. This was not a realistic option because most parents did not have the money to do so. As previously discussed in chapters 1 and 2, the Mexican population lost their land base in the late nineteenth century and became economically dependent on Anglo Americans for employment. The farm labor wages they received were very low, sufficient only for subsistence needs. Third, because state law prohibited non-White children from attending public school with Anglo American students, it is unlikely that Santa Paula residents broke the law by allowing Mexican students to go to school.

THE SCHOOLING OF MEXICAN STUDENTS IN SEPARATE CLASSROOMS IN THE LATE 1800S

Ventura Street School was established in 1882 and South Grammar School in 1898 (Menchaca and Valencia 1990). Both schools were constructed near Anglo American neighborhoods (*VCHSQ* 1959). Linda and José recalled being told by their parents that in the late 1800s and early 1900s a few Mexicans were allowed to attend the Ventura Street and South Grammar Schools. Although there are no available records to verify their remembrances and provide documentary evidence that Mexicans were provided schooling facilities before 1913, there is evidence indicating that some Mexicans were eventually allowed to attend school in certain agricultural towns of Ventura County. The following account is presented to illustrate and corroborate this idea.

During the late 1800s, the agricultural industry of Ventura County boomed, and large-scale farmers were forced to attract workers to their farms (Heil 1983).

One way to recruit farm labor was to provide educational facilities for the children of Mexican farm workers (Gonzalez 1990). The growers took this approach in Sespe, a town adjacent to Santa Paula (*VCHSQ* 1958). At that time, part of the land in Santa Paula and Sespe was owned by the same grower (Teague 1944). Clara Smith, a retired school teacher from the Sespe School District, wrote a short history of the founding of the first schools in Ventura County. Interestingly, she offered a frank discussion of the earliest accounts of school segregation in Ventura County. Smith wrote that records from the Sespe School District indicate that only Anglo American students were permitted to attend school. Finally, in the 1880s, when the agricultural industry prospered, the growers decided that providing some type of schooling for the children of the Mexican farm workers was in their own best interest. Mexican children, however, were required to be schooled apart from Anglo American students. In approximately 1887 a special school was constructed for Mexican students and named San Cayetano. Smith wrote:

> *The region consisted of a Mexican land grant, and around the edge of this grant the white settlers established their homes. A school for the white settlers' children naturally followed. In 1874 or '75 a schoolhouse was built on the north side of the Santa Clara River. . . . There are no names of children born of foreign parents. Nor do the census reports show that there are any foreign born children in the school. The railroad was built in 1887, and soon afterwards a water company developed and distributed water from Sespe Creek. The growing of citrus fruit began. The population increased. Mexicans came to work in the orange and lemon groves. . . . Three districts were formed out of West Sespe and three schools were built; one further up the canyon was on what is now Grand Avenue, the second was the present San Cayetano and the third was Fillmore. San Cayetano became the school for the Mexican children.* (VCHSQ *1958:12, 13)*

Although we are unsure if this schooling process was replicated in Santa Paula, Smith's account reveals that in Ventura County communities schools were built for Mexican students after the growers recruited a large number of farm workers to the area. Santa Paula seems to have experienced a similar development a little later, not until 1913.