

A Cowardly Welcome Home to a Hero

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(March 6, 2023) When most people think of Jim Crow, segregation, and inequality in Texas their first thought, understandably, is the dreadful treatment of African Texans under the system of white superiority endemic of the American South. Many overlook that just as significant, and just as shameful, was the oppressive practices inflicted upon Tejanos during the same period. One of the most disgraceful events directed toward Texans of Mexican descent was the Felix Longoria Affair in Three Rivers, Texas in 1948.

Like many Tejanos when World War II began, Felix Longoria proudly volunteered for service in the United States Army. Longoria served with distinction throughout his tenure, and in the final days of the war he volunteered once again, this time to be a part of a dangerous mission against one of the last remnants of Japanese defenses in the Philippines. Longoria fell during the mission, but his body was never identified and recovered.

After World War II the United States military began to try to recover and return soldiers lost during overseas battles. Longoria's remains were recovered in 1948 and returned to his family in Three Rivers, where they began to prepare him for burial. Three Rivers, like many Texas cities, had a segregated cemetery, which to the local funeral director meant that Longoria, despite his status as a war hero, had to be buried in the "Mexican section." As abominable as that sounds, the custom would segregate people even in death, the situation deteriorated further for the Longorias when the director of the cemetery (who was also the town's only funeral director) refused the use of the burial ground's chapel for the service of the fallen soldier. His explanation? "Whites wouldn't like it," he said, and that "Mexicans had created trouble at previous funerals."

Frustrated, angry, and probably perplexed at such a reaction, Longoria's family turned to a new Mexican American advocacy organization, the American G.I. Forum, and its founder and director Dr. Hector P. Garcia. Latinos had fought and died in numbers far greater than the percentage of their population during World War II, but when they returned, they found they still faced discrimination and oppression and also were denied many of the benefits promised through the G.I. Bill of Rights passed in 1944. Garcia organized the Forum to press for those rights and to fight discrimination.

Garcia and the Forum first chose to meet with the funeral director and appeal to his sense of decency and patriotism but received the same negative response. The Forum next began to protest the action, but that led to no action as well. Garcia then contacted new Texas senator Lyndon B. Johnson to ask for aid, and Johnson tried to broker a compromise, but the funeral director—backed by the white power structure of the city—refused to accommodate the request. Johnson then made arrangements to have Longoria buried at Arlington National Cemetery, where he was interred with full military honors.

The controversy led the Texas House of Representatives to make an investigation, and a five-member special committee held hearings, interviewed participants, and issued a report. Their conclusion baffled Longoria's family and Dr. Garcia. Four of the five committee members concluded that while the funeral director's actions were unfortunate, he had not acted out of a discriminatory policy and had no malice toward the Longorias (a fifth member did not sign the report because he believed the actions to be explicit discrimination). The committee report was symbolic of the larger barrier to any movement on racial and ethnic discrimination: because the system was so entrenched, and was so much a part of the everyday lives of white Texans, they simply could not see how oppressive and reprehensible such discriminatory actions could be. It would be many years, many tears, and many battles before our state would even begin to correct such wrongs. For the Longorias it came too late, but their persistence helped pave the way for future generations to receive greater equality.

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