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**No Civil Rights Allowed**

Her book took decades to compile, and now Cynthia Orozco of ENMU-Ruidoso recounts the struggle for justice among Mexican-Americans

By Dianne Stallings • Ruidoso News

When Cynthia Orozco researched the Mexican-American civil rights movement for a college paper, the experience convinced research was her calling and launched a 30-year project.

Her decades of work culminated late last year with the publication by the University of Texas Press of *No Mexicans, Women or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement*.

In the book, Orozco presents archival information and interviews she believes provides evidence that perceptions of the League of United Latin American Citizens as an organization aimed at assimilation, anti-Mexican and anti-working class doesn't tell the real story of the group's early activism. The book recasts LULAC as being at the forefront of civil rights movements in America.

During an interview this week, the chair of the History and Humanities Department of Eastern New Mexico University-Ruidoso credited her mother's emphasis on education for her early inspiration.

"She's very excited" about the book's publication, Orozco said. "I'm so happy she is alive to see it. There were so many years of silence from the family, because they thought I dropped the project and it never would come to fruition.

"But anyone who looks at my resume will see that I have never focused on just one topic or interest. I am always active wherever I am, in community events and affairs. My interests are many and multi-faceted, and that's why it took so long to finish the book."

The book is aimed at two audiences, she said. The first is the academic community.

"A number of major studies of this organization, in my mind, did not properly situate it within historical context or within the context of social movements, and I wanted to do that," Orozco said.

The book also can serve as a reference source.

"A book doesn't get written by reading other books," she said. "You need to go to the source. I spent thousands of hours going through boxes of papers. No LULAC archive existed when I began and I believe my work helped create a national archive (at the University of Texas-Austin) and also helped create one at the University of New Mexico."

Her second goal was to reach a general audience. "I hope people can move through academic parts to find what is valuable for them inside this book," Orozco said.

"One of the things I hope the book accomplishes is to help people realize we had a Mexican-American civil rights movement and to rethink what we mean by 'civil rights movement.' "

Orozco was born in Cuero, Texas, a ranching and farming community. Her parents Aurora Estrada and Primitivo Orozco, were born in Mexico.

"My mother moved to the United States (South Texas) when she was about 12, and my father in the 1950s. He was a boot maker," Orozco said.

“Mother had a high school education and graduated in 1930s, which was very unusual for Mexican-American women at the time. Due to her efforts, my five brothers and sisters and I all have college degrees and are professionals.”

Orozco recalled that in the 1970s, her mother was a member of LULAC in Cuero. She said Aurora participated in community organizations throughout her junior and senior high school years.

“She was a community activist, a writer and orator,” Orozco said of her mother, who still lives in Texas.

Orozco attended South West Texas University, then transferred to Texas University in Austin, where she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 1980. She went directly into her graduate education, earning a master’s degree two years later and her doctorate in 1992, both in history, from the University of California in Los Angeles.

“I originally was immersed in research since 1978, when I was a sophomore and wrote a 20-page paper on this topic,” Orozco said.

“From then on, I was a researcher. My first job out of college was a research position. But then I was asked to teach at the (University of Texas in San Antonio) and found out how much I loved teaching.”

While working on a Ford Foundation post doctorate in Austin, she heard about the Center for Regional Studies at UNM.

“I was interested in coming to New Mexico, because I understood LULAC had three or four past presidents who came from (New Mexico) and they would be important in understanding the national expansion of the movement,” she said.

Orozco received a fellowship from the Center and during her stay in Albuquerque met a cousin of her husband, Leo Martinez, who has holdings in California and Ruidoso, including a restaurant and stucco company, and who served a term as a Lincoln County commissioner.

His cousin introduced the two and Orozco joined him in Ruidoso in 1996, where she immediately began teaching New Mexico history at ENMU part-time. From 1997 to 2000, she taught New Mexico and Hispanic history full-time in the history department at the University of New Mexico. She joined Eastern full-time in 2000 and was named the first chair of the department about three years ago.

“I’ve worked on this book since 1978,” she said. “My professor told me this was an important topic and had not been researched. I really did become fascinated with history from that point on.

“It also was a senior’s honor thesis and during my master’s and doctorate work, I wrote many papers connected to it.

“When I was writing my dissertation, I was a research associate at Texas State Historical Association and was in charge of integrating Hispanic history into the Texas History Encyclopedia,” Orozco said. “I wrote 80 articles (for the encyclopedia), many related to LULAC. In many cases, I wrote the first biographies of some of those leaders.”

As an undergraduate, she was allowed access to private collections in individuals’ homes, including the personal papers of Alonso S. Perales and Adela Sloss-Vento.

“They are two very important collections that were not yet in libraries,” Orozco said.

“And I also interviewed at least two major founders and a couple of (more minor figures).”

The Perales collection was acquired last year by the University library at Houston, more than 30 years after its significance to the history of the movement was known, she said. "In pre-World War II, Perales was one of two or three of the most important Hispanic lawyers in Texas," she said.

The title of Orozco's book refers to several issues, she said, including the increasing racial segregation oriented against persons of Mexican descent in Texas and parts of New Mexico, Arizona and California.

"It was common to see signs in public places like restaurants, even hospitals and theaters, that said, 'No Mexicans Allowed,' " she said, as well as variations that included dogs and women. "Many people are unaware of segregation of people of Mexican descent. It is not as well known. Everyone is aware of segregation against African-Americans."

The reason women were included in the title stems from the founding of LULAC in 1929 and the initial exclusion of women as members. That was changed about three years later, Orozco said.

"So the title really refers to three things; the racial segregation of people of Mexican descent, despite class or color; the exclusion of Mexican citizens from the organization (to protect the group's American citizenship status); and the initial exclusion of women." Orozco is especially proud of the personal interviews and biographical information in the book.

"When I wrote the dissertation, there were no people in it," she said. "You got a sense of the movement or effort, but not the individuals. I was very happy to conduct biographical research and I ended up describing the lives of 11 founders, all prominent people, none with full-length biographies in any books, yet all deserving of that."

Her work also is the first book to situate the significance of World War I on the Hispanic community, Orozco said.

"The prevalent myth is that the civil rights organizing by the Hispanic community didn't occur until after World War II, but this makes the direct link of how some of these veterans were impacted by the war and some of their experiences after they returned," she said. "LULAC is a result of veterans' work."

"With this book, I try to distinguish between the so-called 'Civil Rights Movement' often described as between black and white, and to argue there was a separate civil rights movement not connected in any way before the 1940s. This precedes that and was a separate parallel struggle with similar problems."

The book also illustrated that the immigration question is something the Mexican-American community has grappled with for many years, Orozco said.

"It's a really complicated question," she said. "Immigration will never go away. It is a permanent fixture of a capitalistic economy while there is an imbalance next to a developing economy. A fence will not keep them out. Too many United States employers hire, sell and rent to Mexicans."

"I believe in a path to citizenship, but I'm not sure amnesty (under President Ronald Reagan) helped with assimilation into the community. And now with the terrorist threat, things have changed and we need to protect our borders. I do believe in full participation by persons of Mexican descent once they are in the United States. They need to be bilingual and bicultural, because that is part of their own empowerment."

No Mexicans, Women or Dogs Allowed is available for \$24.95 through the UT Press Web site, <http://www.utexaspress.com>; 800-252-3206. It's also available at ENMU-Ruidoso at Sierra Mall on Mechem Drive.

Orozco is set for a book signing at 5 p.m., Jan. 20, at ENMU-Ruidoso, and another at the Hubbard Museum of the American West in Ruidoso Downs in April.