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# STORIES OF SOUTH TEXAS

## FOUL BALLS ACROSS THE RIO GRANDE

*by Rene Torres*<sup>1</sup>

“It was as unique as the colorful Conquistador marches through the new world, and as distinct as the turbulent era of the border bandits.” Those were the words of Ramon Garces when describing the history of Laredo baseball.

Based on his research and writings, Garces tells the journey of Laredo baseball from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the 1950s.

You cannot write the history of anything without the input of those that were there—the old timers. Their stories transcended newspapers archives and led to dividing the history of Laredo’s professional baseball into four parts.

Although, Garces speaks only about professional baseball. Semi-pro teams in the region left lasting impressions with their own brand of baseball from the early 1900s and throughout the decades.

Making baseball waves in 1910, as the first part of Laredo baseball history—the border city participated in the “Class D” Southwest Texas League. The SWTL was made-up by the following teams: Brownsville, Laredo, Corpus Christi, Beeville, Victoria and Bay City.

The league had a successful start, but not without debate. Team owners wanted to keep foreigners out of the league, in other words, forbidding Mexicans and African Americans from partaking in the league

The argument quickly ended, when officials realized that the rosters of the teams included many European born players. Laredo was the only team that had Latinos— former Laredo Mayor Albert Martin, played during this era.

Melvin Gallia, who played first with Beeville—was a Czechoslovakian, that went on to play for several major league teams, but not before wearing a Laredo uniform in 1911.

Unfortunately, the league folded in 1911 after its second season—due to low ticket sales and the expense of riding the train. The first part of Laredo’s baseball history ended in 1920.

The iconic “Milmo Team,” dominated the second phase of Laredo baseball. Garces does not give much detail from this period but mentions the historic

characters of this highly regarded team. Those well-known South Texas Latino players included: Pitcher, Guadalupe Rodriguez, Center Fielder, Leo Najo, Shortstop, and Cubano Jimenez. They were giants on the diamond, but their exploits for some reason-- were left out from the newspapers of then.

As the depression and the war years revealed its ugly faces, a new generation of ball players took over between 1930-1940. It was then that baseball in Laredo, according the Garces, moves from the sandlots to modern era baseball. Evidence to this new epoch was given when Martin and Jimenez founded the Laredo Baseball Park.

### **Girls on the Diamond...**

As WW II interrupted our daily lives and local men, and women were joining the war effort. Baseball took a backseat until after the war. The ladies were not only taking the jobs that the men left behind but escalating the possibilities of bringing the fans back to the ballpark.

Filling the vacuum to the lack of baseball during the conflict was taken over by the girls, who were on the diamond engaged in playing fastpitch softball. In Laredo, as in the Rio Grande Valley, girls' softball was the main entertainment of the era. Attracting record number of fans to the ballpark.

In 1941, the Laredo Lionettes, managed by George Dabdoub, had a 19 and 4 record. Their schedule included games against Ethel's of Corpus Christi, Bells from San Antonio, Sweet and Long from Corpus and McAllen.

May Gutierrez was the ace of the team, with a record of 10 wins in 13 starts, and with an earned run average of .0769 per game. She was spectacular!!

The border squad had a team batting average of .385, and setting the standard at the plate was, Santos Quiroz, with a hitting average of .446. They rounded the bases at will — tallying 346 runs to their opponents 145. In one game, they whipped one rival 78 to 4.

In the decade of the 1940s, the Laredo girls created an atmosphere of which— if you were at the ballpark you drifted away from the daily woes of war. They demonstrated that their place was at “HOME,” first, second, and third.

### **Hardball returns after the war...**

By 1949, organized baseball comes to Laredo under the leadership of George Peters—who later became a scout for the for the St. Louis Browns. In that same year, he formed a club that participated in the Class “D” Rio Grande League.

The scorching sun and humidity of South Texas were the culprits in fans choosing the air-conditioned movie theater over baseball. That is until, night baseball came to town. Renewed interest in America's game was highlighted when Webb County constructed a lighted ballpark at the cost of \$40,000.

Having local talent helped in bringing city folks to the ballpark. The list of homegrown talent included: Beto Martinez, Fabian Mendoza, Mazo Garza, Ismael Montalvo and Freddie Leyendecker.

A contest was held to name the club, and the winner was Mrs. Severo Flores, a Laredo housewife. The winning name... the "Apaches," named after the tribe of that name which roamed that part of the country.

Unfortunately, in the middle of the season, Peters sold the team to Paul Young—but this did not impede the team's hope for a successful season.

Displaying plenty of symptoms of success, Laredo secured second place in Class "D" Valley Professional League. The Brownsville Charros defeated Laredo in the playoffs 4 games to one.

The following year, the Apaches are on the move again—the team is sold to a Laredo businessman, Nick Canavati. With a change of philosophy, Canavati recruited players from Cuba, and Mexico—a change from the first year, in which the roster was filled with local talent.

Diversifying the roster with foreign players made little change in the standings—as Laredo again, ended the season without a title. The Corpus Christi Aces eliminated Laredo in playoffs.

Seen as an excursion every time they played an out of town game. A move by Brownsville, Harlingen, Corpus Christi and Laredo joined the Class "B" Gulf Coast League. A costly transfer due to the traveling involved. Which included journeys to play the other teams in league that included: Galveston, Texas City, Port Arthur and Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Ready to move forward in the new league, Canavati hires ex-Valley League President, Boyd "Jelly" SoRelle as business manager.

Laredo started the 1951 season with great promise winning nine straight encounters—taking the top spot of the league for a month.

This followed with a losing streak, causing a lack of interest by the fans that led to dwindling gate receipts. The selling of one of the most popular players, Hank Robinson, and the firing of manager Julian Morgan signaled a downward spiral in the standings.

As the team did their best on the diamond—team owner Canavita, had enough, and sold the team to a group of stockholders headed by Dr. Steve Graham Sr., and former manager Morgan, was rehired when the club was in the cellar.

Under Morgan, Laredo climbs the ladder—putting more crooked numbers on the board then before, in fact, soaring enough to make the playoffs as a fourth-place team.

Laredo ended the circuit winning 75 and losing 79 games. They were quickly eliminated in the post season by Corpus, four game to two. Brownsville won the title by defeating Harlingen and Corpus Christi.

Garces finishes the "Early History of Laredo Baseball," in 1952. It was then that

Dr. Graham resigned the presidency for health reasons, and Louis Kowalski Sr, a prominent businessman took over.

The rest of the of Laredo's professional baseball history continues as published in Wikipedia. They wrote as to the end of the border town's final two years in the Gulf Coast League. Laredo and the league closed its gates after the 1953 season.

### **Professional baseball comes back in 1985 with the Tecolotes invading the city...**

In a New York Times article written by James Wagner, describes the baseball episode between the two Laredo's' as period of cross border unity. Wagner eloquently wrote what he witnessed at the ballpark. "The National Anthems of U.S. and Mexico were played over the stadium speakers as the flag of both countries fluttered in the hot summer wind." As unique as it was, it was still America's game, with no emigration laws interrupting the flow of fans coming to the ballpark.

By 1995, a new Apache team comes to town, from San Antonio, the Tejanos. Which found themselves in the cellar with a 17-32 record and averaging 700 fans per game. Their games were replete with more diamond muffs, than mighty swings—and were down and out as quickly as they came in.

The Apaches participated in Rio Grande League from 1949-1950, in the Gulf Coast League 1951-53, and Texas-Louisiana League in 1995.

Professional Baseball moved to the next decade— creating new base paths at the Uni-Trade Ballpark. The two Laredo's continued the legacy left behind by those that took the original magical journey from the sandlots to diamond.

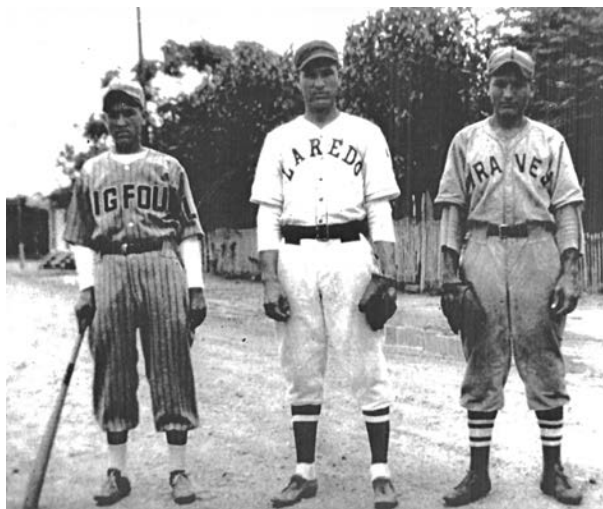
The rest of the Laredo's baseball history is embedded in the pages of old newspapers archives, dairies and in the voices of the old-timers of that by-gone-era.

You can get a more detailed history of Laredo baseball in the book, "Baseball on the Border: A Tale of two Laredo's," by Alan M. Klein.



**LAREDO, TEXAS, TEAM—Southwest Texas League**  
1, Ramos; 2, Gallia; 3, Gambrell; 4, Dodd; 5, Carr; 6, Charles; 7, Sheffield; 8, McCully; 9, Hernandez; 10, Witt; 11, Francis; 12, Wright; 13, Johns,

1910 Laredo team



1940 Dovalina Brothers

## Endnotes

1 Rene Torres is a retired assistant professor from the University of Texas at Brownsville, and Texas Southmost College. He is known in the Rio Grande Valley as an avid sports historian, researcher, writer, and humanitarian. Rene has been inducted into the Rio Grande Valley Sports Hall of Fame, Laredo Latin American International Sports Hall of Fame, Leo Najo Baseball Hall of Fame, in Mission, Texas, and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Hall of Honor. His involvement in his community was knowledge nationally when he received the Jefferson Award for Public Service in Washington D.C. NOTE: Excerpts from this article were taken from the original story researched and written by Ramon Garces, from the book, "The 1952 Big State League and Gulf Coast League.

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