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David Montejano: Life on a Rollercoaster

by Manuel Medrano

In 1959, the Organization of American Historians initiated the Frederick Jackson Turner Award. The prize is given to the book that best exemplifies scholarly and pedagogical excellence. In 1988, Professor David Montejano, a *Tejano*, became the first Latino to receive it. To him, it was a high point of an academic life he describes as “a roller coaster ride.”¹ What follows are his own recollections of the journey.

Although he was born in Del Rio, Texas, Montejano moved to San Antonio with his family when he was two years old. Being zoned to the Edgewood School District, one of the poorer school districts in the state, influenced his parents’ decision to send their children to a private school. Thus, he attended Central Catholic High School, a college preparatory secondary school located in downtown San Antonio. The rigorous English Department there developed in Montejano an appreciation and enjoyment of English. Consequently, he joined the Speech and Debate Society. Its alumni included Henry Cisneros, Willie Velasquez and others who later emerged as leaders throughout the state. These experiences proved to be a valuable foundation for his later endeavors.

In 1966, he enrolled at Texas State University, then called West Texas College, in San Marcos. Although it was a racially divided community, Montejano remained there one year. He remembers, “It was a cowboy college. It was like walking back in time... San Antonio... wasn’t as rigidly segregated as San Marcos. It was incredible.”² While

there, he joined the Starr County farm workers on their march to Austin for higher wages and improved working conditions. He did not return to West Texas College, but instead transferred to the University of Texas at Austin, where he completed his bachelor's degree in 1970.

Montejano's college education coincided with the era of the Chicano *movimiento* and all of its complexities. He recalls, "the farm worker campaign, civil rights movements and the anti-war rallies were occurring; it seemed like the world was changing right before my eyes, and, of course, I felt like I was part of that, too."³ He realized that sociology might provide him with the tools and theories to explain these changes; utilizing history would come later.

As a sophomore of the University of Texas, Montejano helped organize M.A.S.O., the Mexican American Student Organization, the first non-party Latino organization. It soon began political activities on campus. A particularly memorable one protested Kappa Sigma Chi's "Mexican party" commemorating Texas Independence Day where members marched out of their fraternity house drunk portraying Mexican soldiers, acting stupidly. M.A.S.O. revealed this disturbing public racist stereotyping to the Mexican consulate, who took action to end it. Members of that M.A.S.O. organization included José Limón, later professor and Director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at UT Austin and Alex Moreno, former south Texas state legislator.

Although Montejano excelled in class, there were some incidents with a few professors. He remembers, "I wrote better than *casí todos los gavachos* [almost all the Anglos],...but...one professor accused me of plagiarism. [After Montejano had worked for nearly a year on a paper.] He said my paper was too well-written, too exceedingly well-researched that it could not have been me."⁴ Montejano was in a select honors program, so his honors program professor informed his accuser that he was an excellent writer who would not plagiarize. A second incident involved a creative writing professor whom Montejano had been warned about. In this class, he never received higher than Bs and Cs on his essays and suspected his professor of ethnic evaluation. Thus, he began to translate translated award-winning short stories by Latino authors into English and submitted them as his assignments. Montejano commented that Jorge Luis Borges, the great Argentinean writer, received a B. He remembers, "That was UT Austin; it was very Southern."⁵

Montejano believed that pursuing a graduate degree in sociology would help explain the changes of his time with plausible, applicable research. After applying to

the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin, he then pursued a Ford Foundation doctoral fellowship. The rigorous selection process for finalists included an interview with the Ford Foundation Selection Committee members in New York City. The Selection Committee was so impressed with both his test scores and his scholarship potential that one member suggested that he meet with Professor Rodolfo Alvarez, renowned sociologist, at Yale University, only eighty miles away. Montejano never even imagined applying there; nevertheless, he went. Professor Alvarez immediately recognized his potential. Alvarez introduced him to the dean, who reviewed his records, and soon, Montejano was admitted and given a fellowship along with a Ford Foundation award. He comments, "It was total serendipity, one of those coincidences. Somebody says, 'Do this; check this out' and it happens."⁶

Montejano's years at Yale were transformational. When he began his studies, there were only ten Latinos in the professional and graduate programs. Montejano's family had an interesting perspective about his time there. One particular anecdote provides an insight on just how far from his family in San Antonio he really was. He laughed and remembered,

"There's a joke that my mother would tell. I don't think she meant it to be a joke, but it really happened. One of my aunts didn't see me for awhile because I was at Yale, but she knew that I had been involved in all la política there in Austin and had been arrested. She knew all that, so she asked my mother, '¿Donde está David?' Y mamá le dijo 'Pues está en Yale.' Y la tía dice '¿ay que hizo ahora?!'"⁷

So, his mother had to explain to his aunt that Yale was not jail. Yale was the name of the university.

Much of his learning occurred outside the classroom because of the broad diversity in the Northeast population. Many people there did not know what a Mexican-American was. In the classroom, he had to prove he belonged there. During his first semester, the few Latinos sometimes questioned what they were doing there. As Montejano became more comfortable with what was expected of him, he realized that at Yale everybody "is as smart as you are."⁸

Montejano also became comfortable using the historical method in sociological research. He asked nationally-acclaimed sociologist Stan Greenberg to be on his dissertation committee. Greenberg had conducted research in South Africa and the southern United States. Montejano's original dissertation topic was the San Antonio

Brown Berets. He arranged a meeting and informed them about his proposed research. They allowed him into their confidence. Soon, he realized they wanted only a romantic portrayal of the Berets. His committee, on the other hand, wanted an academic, objective account that would probably embarrass the group. Montejano was at a crossroads. Fortunately, at this time he met Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist. Taylor had investigated the “Mexican problem” in the 1920s and 1930s, collecting data primarily in the Midwest and the Southwest, mostly about *Mexicanos*.

Yet, most of his interviewees were not with Mexican-American workers, but Anglo employers, including ranchers, farmers, teachers and politicians. By this time, Montejano had left Yale with an unfinished dissertation and taken a job at the University of California at Berkley. There, he met an aged Paul Taylor, who informed him that many of his original interviews were in the Bancroft Library on campus and that he had only used ten percent of them. Furthermore, Taylor encouraged him to read them.

Montejano focused on the approximately three hundred interviews in Texas, and soon knew that these would be the basis of a new dissertation topic. Taylor, a northern Anglo, had asked Anglo Texans what they thought of Mexican-Americans, and they candidly told him. Montejano remembers, “They are telling him *a la grava*, no holes barred... I was hooked... they provided a lens into the past... the interviews with the smoking gun... There were the city council people, the politicians that said, ‘no, we passed an ordinance to put all the Mexican residences and businesses on that side.’”⁹ The labor laws were created to maintain control of the cheap Mexican-American labor. In Willacy County, these workers were required to have a signed pass from a farmer to travel in the county. In these interviews, Montejano discovered that the intent to segregate was there and commented that “it was really shocking.”¹⁰

He was not rehired at Berkley, yet still completed his dissertation at U.C. Santa Cruz. He recalls that moment when he realized that he had finished, “I said, ‘*Chihuahuas*, man. When am I ever going to get done? Do I have five consecutive chapters?’... So I looked and looked, ‘Hey, I have five consecutive chapters!’... The dissertation goes from 1900 to 1930, and it’s called *The Making of Segregation*, ‘I’ll finish the rest later.’ That’s what happened. I finished it, turned it in, and then, of course, I kept working on it... Years later, the book came out.”¹¹

Despite completing his dissertation, we was not rehired at U. C. Santa Cruz either. At this point, he was frustrated with academic life and decided to return to Texas. He thought, “ ‘Well, man, that’s all I can do... If I’m not a professor, I don’t know what else

to do.’ So I took a break. I went to work with ... Willie Velasquez in San Antonio, which was good... It was grounding.” The William C. Velasquez Institute had been created to improve political and economic participation in Latino communities.

Within a year, he returned to academia at the University of New Mexico in the Sociology Department. While there, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* was published. He then applied for tenure. Regrettably, he was rejected. He recalls,

“Anyway, I was really upset... The week, I’m saying the week after I get turned down, the announcement that I won the Frederick-Jackson Turner Prize comes out. This was the prize given for the best book in American history. There are not too many of us walking around, man, with that prize. It was like coming out from under the bridge... The department was embarrassed.”¹²

Although the department attempted to rescind its decision, Montejano was now receiving calls from major universities across the country to apply for jobs he had not even considered. He became a professor and Director of the Center of Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He worked in the Borderlands area with other *Tejano* scholars including Ricardo Romo, José Limón and Rolando Hinojosa. He remembers, “So I was there for thirteen years. Talk about bumps man; sometimes the young, the graduate students think that... you’re a full professor now and you got all these books and it must have been a smooth ride. *No hombre*, it’s not like that at all. It’s been a roller coaster.... There were many times that I could have stopped, quit easily, but I thought, ‘No, I got to finish the dissertation.’ I spent too much time. I had gone past the point of no return. I had to finish this.”¹³

In 2000, he returned to the University of California at Berkley to become professor of Ethnic Studies and is still there. His most recent books are *Quixote Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (2010) and *Sancho’s Journal: Exploring the Political Edge with the Brown Berets* (2012). Today, as he nears the end of his teaching career, Montejano understands that as good professor you have “to be accessible... in your language and your teaching. You make yourself understood... Professors intimidate students through the vocabulary, the language and so forth. Just keep things understandable.” P8. For nearly forty years, he has kept it understandable and his students and the academic community are the better for it.

ENDNOTES

1. Interview with David Montejano. March 4th 2013. P.1.
2. Interview with David Montejano. March 4th 2013. P.1.
3. Interview with David Montejano. March 4th 2013. P.2.
4. Interview with David Montejano. March 4th 2013. P.3
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13. Interview with David Montejano. March 4th 2013. P.8.

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