Zoot Suit Riots: Remembering the WWII era Los Angeles race riots

By Ben Baeder, Staff Writer, @ReporterBen on Twitter

Depending on who is writing the history, the week of June 3, 1943, is referred to as either the beginning of Los Angeles' Zoot Suit Riots or the time of its Sailor Riots. Regardless.

From Los Nietos to Pasadena and from Venice to Watts, sailors from the U.S. Navy raided movie theaters and homes looking for trouble. They ripped the baggy zoot suits off Latino youths, and then beat them with whips and clubs.

For the most part, the sailors were cheered on by the city's newspapers and some of its leaders and residents.

"The fleet men, who went methodically about applying the fist's and rope's ends to the gang terror problem, reported "all's well," following a night of wild rioting which sent the hoodlums under cover," read a June 5, 1943, front-page story on the cover of the Herald-Express, the city's biggest newspaper at the time.

As the 70th anniversary of the riots approaches, scholars are still trying to identify exactly what caused them, and what they meant. Most agree Los Angeles was never the same after the bloody week of riots.

The pachuco style certainly became a point of honor for the Chicano movement in the 1970s. To leaders of that movement, the men of the early 1940s were the first Latinos to have pride in the face of an unfair megalopolis that forbade Latino families from living in most neighborhoods.

That said, there are those who believe many of the zoot suit-clad Latino youths were punks, plain and simple. Violent kids who, when faced with adversity, submerged into an underworld of violence and drug abuse that is now manifest as the street gangs that have plagued Latino neighborhoods for decades.

Scholar and historian Eduardo Obregon Pagan, who wrote "Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, & Riot in Wartime L.A.," takes a more nuanced view.

The incidents and views that led to the riots existed in a rapidly changing world, he believes. Whites lashed out against youths who challenged the entrenched racial and gender roles. Ethnic Latinos living in the U.S. at the time couldn't eat at certain restaurants and were expected to step off the sidewalk for white pedestrians.

"What happened is that these kids sort of accidentally were challenging segregation," Pagan said. "They grew up thinking they were Americans."

As teenagers, they earned spending money in the booming war economy, and they became infatuated with jazz and the cool zoot suits, and spoke a language all their own.

While the rest of society was conserving cloth, the pachuco kids were wearing baggy, audacious outfits. Servicemen, many seeing Southern California for the first time, believed the zoot suits were a sign that Latinos in Los Angeles were an out-of-control, anti-American crime wave that could only be snuffed by the might of the U.S. armed forces.

"The material (for the zoot suits) was called shark skin, it had to be shark skin," said Gene Cabral, who was 15 at the time and was living with his family in Chavez Ravine when the riots broke out.
The suits featured poofy pants pegged at the ankles. If a youth could afford it, he or she could get a long jacket, as well. The jacket sleeves had to hang to the end of the fingertips.

"Some guys would buy (pants with) the ankles so small they would have to put on a sort of lubricant to get the pants on over their feet," he said. "We called them ankle chokers."

To Cabral and the kids from Chavez Ravine, the suits had nothing to do with politics, defiance or ethnic pride.

"You felt good when you dressed up," he said. "We wore these suits to church."

Like Pagan, Cabral didn't think most kids were considering ideas of ethnicity when they put on their suits and went out dancing or walking through the barrios.

Cabral's house was less than two blocks from the Naval Armory where most of the mobs of soldiers began their attacks.

The assaults stunned him and his friends.

"I guess all I thought is, 'What the hell? If I go out there, someone is going to beat me?' " he said. "It didn't make sense to me. I just stayed in my house with my young mind trying to figure out what we did wrong."

(Story continues below)

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In the eyes of sailors, the media and authorities, what Cabral did wrong was to be born to Latino parents.

Starting in the summer of 1942, newspapers began running stories about a "Mexican gang war" on the streets of Los Angeles. The stories weren't supported by facts or even statistics.

There were certainly some heinous crimes committed by Latino youths, but they didn't seem any more frequent than other crimes of the day, according to a study from the day.

Nonetheless, newspapers ran bombastic headlines and used charged language for nearly every crime by a Latino.

"Marijuana Orgies Before Terror Sorties Bared in Gang Roundup," ran one headline over an August 1942 story about the famous Sleepy Lagoon case.

"BLACK WIDOW GIRLS IN BOY GANGS; WAR ON VANDALS PUSHED" read another headline that same week.

Latino kids were consistently referred to as "delinquents," "goons" and "hoodlums."

From about June 1942 to May 1943, the city's newspapers, especially the wildly popular Herald-Express evening paper, ran stories about the "Juvenile War" being waged on the county’s streets by Latino kids.

But government statistics reported at the time found no increase in youth crime or delinquency.
"Increase in juvenile delinquency here has been grossly exaggerated as a wartime factor, it was asserted today by Heman G. Stark, director of the Civilian Service Corps and Co-ordinating Council of Los Angeles County," read a May 20, 1943, article in the Herald.

Pagan and others have speculated that wartime anxiety was taking a toll on citizens. Experienced police officers were off at war, and people wanted to feel secure at home.

During the summer the 1943, while the heat hit the streets in the form of fights and riots between the sailors and latino youth, newspapers headlines only fueled the fires of racism and fear. (Article originally published in the Long Beach Independent on June 15, 1943)

**Gallery: The Zoot Suit Riots, as covered by newspapers in the 1940s**

Politicians, the local police and newspaper editors all seem to have decided something needed to be done.

Then-California Gov. Culbert Olson on Aug. 5, 1942, directed the California Youth Authority to crack down on youth gangs.

The kids from the Sleepy Lagoon murder case - which was aimed at more than 20 youths from 38th Street in Los Angeles who were blamed for the murder of a 22-year-old man in what is now Commerce - became the test case for the government's efforts to control Latino youths.

Despite a lack of evidence, 12 of the youths in January 1943 were found guilty of murder.

And despite the convictions, stories about the "terror" caused by Latino youths didn't stop.

"They wanted to make an example of these youth," said Gerardo Licon, an expert in wartime Latino culture and assistant professor in the program of Latin American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

"They wanted to create the image of safety," said Licon, who grew up in the Los Angeles area. "It ended up backfiring. Instead of the public getting the impression that police had things under control, the public felt like things were out of control."

The Mexican government saw the coverage as an opportunity to blame the riots on right-wing Sinarquista groups in Mexico, with their agents in the United States claiming that the semi-fascist political party was providing young Latinos in the U.S. with marijuana and political propaganda, an accusation that proved to be completely without proof.

Nonetheless, the headlines continued.

After several small riots between Latinos and sailors, a police shooting of a Latino youth by a police officer and several other robberies reported in the city's newspapers, people were on edge.

"Previously, zoot suiters had figured in a riot with servicemen on the Venice Pier, in early May, in riots in San Fernando, Duarte, Monrovia and Azusa, and last in August in a Montebello murder in which 12 youths were convicted," read an article in the Los Angeles Examiner that gave a background of how the riots had started.
Soldier, sailors and marines who roamed the streets of Los Angeles, June 7, 1943, looking for hoodlums in zoot suits, stopped this streetcar during their search. Crowds jammed downtown streets to watch the service men tear clothing off the zoot suiters they caught. (AP Photo)

Soldier, sailors and marines who roamed the streets of Los Angeles, June 7, 1943, looking for hoodlums in zoot suits, stopped this streetcar during their search. Crowds jammed downtown streets to watch the service men tear clothing off the zoot suiters they caught. (AP Photo)

By late May and early June of 1943, rumors were swirling about two sailors' wives being attacked by pachucos.

The newspapers at the time didn't run any stories matching the rumor, although there was one story of two Latino women being attacked in Elysian Park.

There also was a story about pachucos attacking sailor Joe Dacy Coleman in downtown Los Angeles on May 31.

Sailors, most of whom grew up in other states and had very little contact with Latinos, were streaming into Southern California to prepare for war.

On June 3, sailors with clubs and other weapons started looking for Latino kids to beat.

On June 4, a caravan of 20 cars - mostly taxicabs hired by sailors - began combing the Los Angeles area looking for more Latinos. Word was out, however, and many of the Latino youths were staying indoors.

The sailors headed to East L.A., where they attacked about 20 youths, according reports at the time.

By June 6, the riots had reached a fever pitch. Navy men positioned themselves on street corners while Latino kids were taunting them to try to draw them into more fights, according to news accounts.

Sailors seemed to be beating youths indiscriminately, including several white youths who weren't wearing zoot suits, according to news accounts.

On that day, at least 55 Latino youths wound up in area hospitals, according to news accounts.

Things slowed down the next day.

"Through the east side district erstwhile wearers of the fantastic frock coat and exaggerated peg-top pants took advantage of the lull in fighting to slink home in diapers or covering hastily improvised from newspapers," wrote Herald reporters on June 8.
The riots finally subsided after the military ordered all its men back to their quarters, but the damage had been done. Teenagers and young men all over Southern California had been stripped of their clothes and beaten.

The city's black weekly newspaper, the California Eagle, jumped to the defense of the young Latinos.

Editor Charlotta Spears Bass blasted the local newspapers and urged blacks to stand with Latinos.

She wrote a headline "Screwball Serenade" after the Los Angeles City Council decided to ban zoot suits in response to the riots.

She accused the mainstream newspapers of "race baiting."

The state government commissioned a report accusing local authorities and newspapers of stoking the flames of racial discord.

For many Latino families, the week seared them with a feeling of exclusion, that they weren't part of mainstream society.

Olga Gutierrez of El Monte, who grew up in East Los Angeles, remembers two young men knocking on her front door and asking if they could pass through the house and leave out the back door.

Gutierrez was only 5 at the time. The men were her uncle's friends.

They passed quickly through the home.

Then, two sailors barged in. The older members of her family screamed at the sailors and made them leave.

"We were the most square family in East Los Angeles," Gutierrez said.

"And, until then, my dad did not like the pachucos. But after that day, he changed his mind. At least they were polite enough to ask for permission to come in. The sailors scared us, all of us little kids.

After that, those two pachucos were OK to my dad."

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