

the AFRICAN AMERICAN *experience*

Famous American Crimes and Trials

Volume III: 1913-1959

Frankie Y. Bailey and Steven Chermak

The Sleepy Lagoon Murder and the "Zoot Suit" Riots: Los Angeles at War

Joe Walker

When the history of Latinos and their role in the development of Los Angeles are discussed, almost all references go to the original pueblo that was built over 200 years ago in what is now downtown Los Angeles. There is much interest in and much written about the Spanish missions that were built in the 1700s and 1800s all throughout California, and the four within Los Angeles County. However, very little is written about how the indigenous Mexican populace adapted to the huge influx of European immigration that began in the middle of the nineteenth century. Two events, the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the subsequent "zoot suit" riots in 1942 and 1943, had much more to do with the way the two cultures mixed—and did not mix.

Nothing remains of the Williams Ranch and the swimming hole that in 1942 were the center of one of the biggest murder mysteries in local history. Located near Slauson Avenue in the city of Bell, the ranch is now an industrial park and warehouse with ominous "no trespassing" signs posted. No wonder. This place had a significant role in Los Angeles history, and the current owners probably do not want sightseers climbing the fence.

In late 1941, with huge world tensions from the devastating Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the frightening Nazi takeover of most of Europe, local newspapers paid more and more attention to the native threat to national security. As the U.S. government rounded up hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans, attention turned to another large minority population—Mexican Americans. Primarily driven by the large newspaper chains, the circulation-hungry local papers gave big play to any and all incidents of Mexican American crime.



[Click to see larger image](#)

Alleged leaders of Zoot Suit Gang. (Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library)

Many stories have been told over the years about what triggered the Sleepy Lagoon legend, but some facts are not disputed. The night of August 1, 1942, started like any other, with young people enjoying their independence in the Los Angeles car culture. Some went to an area near the Williams Ranch on the east side of Los Angeles. There was a pond in an abandoned gravel pit that was used for swimming (McWilliams, 1968, p. 228). Hank Leyvas had taken his girlfriend, Dora Barrios, for a drive there. Hank would play a key role in the saga that followed. So would another young man named José Díaz.

The Accused and the Victim

Enrique "Henry" (Hank) Leyvas

Enrique "Henry" Leyvas, known to his friends as Hank, was born in Tucson, Arizona, on April 24, 1923, to Guadalupe Reyes and Seferino Leyvas. Hank spent his earliest years in Arizona, but his family soon found a home and a comfortable life in the 38th Street neighborhood of Los Angeles. Early in his life, Hank became known as a guy who was always there when trouble started. He started getting arrested for "suspicion" of various crimes, which was how the local police arrested people they identified as the criminal element without actually having a legitimate reason or charge. Hank attracted so much negative attention from the police that he and his brother once spent three days in jail for car theft, when the car they were driving was actually their father's. Trumped-up charges like this were common for Hank, who was never polite and deferential when stopped by the police. He was someone who spoke up for his rights, a rare thing in the early 1940s for a Mexican American teenager. One time the police stormed his house, saying that he had been seen committing an armed robbery earlier that night, when he was actually in jail at the time of the alleged incident. It was no secret that the Los Angeles police had it in for Hank. According to historian Eduardo Pagán, the Los Angeles police labeled Hank "a delinquent with a chip on his shoulder, largely because he was the kind of kid who would stand up for his rights.... He would protest if he were arrested, for example. He would challenge them" (Eduardo Pagán interview, PBS, 2001).

The same could be said of José Díaz, whose murder triggered the Sleepy Lagoon trial and brought Hank so much notoriety. Hank worked hard to earn enough money to assist his family. But he never embraced the migrant farm worker life the way José did. To this day, it is not known whether Hank and José ever knew each other or ever met, but if they had they would have found that they had much in common. Both were quite devoted to their mothers, a trait that has a long, honorable history in the Mexican culture. Both men were very much concerned with their appearances, and Hank also favored the "zoot suit" look, also known as "drapes," that was sweeping the Mexican American community of Los Angeles (McWilliams, 1968, p. 242).

When Hank was not socializing while dressed up in his zoot suit, or being harassed by the police, he was most likely under the hood of a car learning about its workings and fixing some difficult mechanical problem. Hank's skills were of a technical and mechanical nature, and he was well known in his neighborhood as a lover of fast cars and fast driving, and well liked for his ability to fix other people's cars.

However, Hank was widely seen as the leader of the 38th Street Boys, and was both feared and respected by his peers. On the night of August 1, 1942, without warning or provocation, Dora, his girlfriend, and Hank were attacked by a group of boys called the "Downey Boys" from a rival neighborhood. Hank and Dora were badly beaten. The boys and young men from the 38th Street area were not gangs in the sense that is known today. They were more like "cliques," groups of friends bound together by common language and heritage.

After the attack, Hank returned to his neighborhood and notified his friends. Volunteers were easy to find. Beating a rival's girlfriend was a major violation of street rules, and revenge had to be swift and severe. Approximately forty young men and women in eight automobiles headed for the Sleepy Lagoon, located on the Williams Ranch (Pagán, 2003, p. 64).

José Díaz

That same night, José Díaz was at a birthday party on the Williams Ranch where he and other Mexican American families worked and lived. José was also celebrating another milestone in his life. He had recently signed up for the U.S. Army, which had a long tradition of providing immigrants with a stable life with a better chance of success than staying behind at the home front did. Another factor that must have weighed on Díaz's mind was the policy of granting citizenship to foreign nationals who served in the U.S. military. (This policy was in effect before World War II and was even an issue widely discussed during the 2003 Iraq conflict.)

The Díaz family was like many Mexican American families who arrived in California in the first third of the twentieth century. Fleeing famine and the violent aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, they saw the North as an island of calm and political stability. When the stock market crashed in 1929, the Díaz family was living a peaceful existence in ranch bunkhouses. There were many such ranches on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Tight subcultures existed there, and many of the families celebrated holidays together, along with weddings and funerals. Almost all the Mexican American families who lived on the ranch were Roman Catholics. The Catholic Church had a strong presence in this community, going back to the days of the Spanish priests who built the string of twenty-one missions in California in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

That night, the 38th Street Boys carefully approached the place where Hank and Dora had been attacked. Adrenaline was running high as they anticipated a swift and violent retribution. Then they realized no one was there. Disappointed, they searched the area for signs that the assailants still remained in the area. Within moments they heard the sound of the party and assumed that the Downey Boys were the ones throwing the event. Hank and his friends approached the house, and fighting immediately broke out between the men and women. After what could roughly be considered a stalemate, the 38th Streeters returned to their cars and drove away. It is not known if any of the group saw José Díaz lying in the grass nearby.

José Díaz was a twenty-two-year-old farm hand. While the press and police would name José and his attackers as gang members and hoodlums, he was not in any organized gang or club. He simply had people with whom he socialized. Díaz had been born on December 9, 1919, to Teodoro and Panfila Díaz in the Mexican state of Durango. José enjoyed listening to jazz music, which was popular with young people at the time, and he followed the teenage trends when it came to his style of dress (Eduardo Pagán interview, PBS, 2001). Clothes and appearance were important to José. When he went out, he loved wearing white shirt and pegged pants that were a part of what was known as a "zoot suit." Regarding this fashion fad,

Josélit writes:

Adopted by African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and aspiring hepcats, the outfit spoke of freedom and release rather than restraint and control. (The term itself, with its origin in urban jazz culture, connoted exaggeration). Despite its unusual proportions and snug fit—the jacket hugged the knees while the trousers were so tightly pegged at the bottom that a shoehorn was required to help poke the feet through—the zoot suit, according to social worker Fritz Redl, was a “declaration of independence.” (2001, p. 192)

On the night that he died, José had told his mother he really didn't want to go to the party to which he was invited. Excited about his upcoming army induction, and so bursting with pride that he had recently had his first professional photograph taken, José was moving away from the culture that marked teenage life and looking forward to a life away from the Williams Ranch and farming. The summer of 1942 had seen constant newspaper and radio reports about the war in the Pacific and the war with Germany. Los Angeles had just completed an evacuation of almost all Japanese American residents, identifying them as security risks. War fever was at an all-time high, and José wanted to be a part of it. The risks of being injured or killed were far in the back of his mind in the way that young people never really believe that a dangerous venture could lead to a fatal outcome. José was a daring young man who had his life ahead of him—until he was killed that night at Sleepy Lagoon (Eduardo Pagán interview, PBS, 2001).

There has never been any mention, or any real proof, that José Díaz had anything to do with the Leyvas attack. There is also no evidence that he even knew about it. About thirty minutes before the 38th Street Boys made their appearance at the party, Díaz left with two other partygoers. The Williams Ranch party was well attended—with plenty of food, drink, loud music, and dancing. Eleanor Delgadillo, the young woman whose birthday party was being held at the house, later testified that José left with two young men named Luís “Cito” Vargas and Andrew Torres. Nothing was ever learned from these men as to what they saw or heard; indeed, they were never considered suspects in the Díaz death (PBS, 2001).

When neighbors found Díaz's badly beaten but still breathing body lying in the grass near the party, they contacted the police. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department patrolled this area of the unincorporated county, and sheriff's deputies and detectives began their investigation. They learned about the gathering the night before, the fight, and the key players involved in crashing the party. They quickly arrested Henry Leyvas and dozens of other Latino men and Latina women who were associated with him and his group.

Meanwhile, Lino Díaz, José's brother, was home at the time that his brother was found. He rushed him to the Los Angeles County General Hospital. José died soon after. The death certificate stated that the cause of death was a contusion of the brain and a subdural hemorrhage due to a fracture of his skull. His face was cut and swollen, he had been stabbed twice, and a finger on his left hand was broken. The rest of José's family had been out of town in Central California working on the prune harvest. When Socorro, José's brother, became ill, the family cut short their employment and returned home on the night of the murder. Little did they know as they returned to the Williams Ranch that they were about to be at the center of the most racially charged murder case in Los Angeles history.