It all started, this effort to find a missing piece of history, with a newspaper reporter's epiphany.

In the early 1990s, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez was struck by the absence of stories about the estimated half million Latinos who served in the U.S. military during World War II.

The war was a turning point for hundreds of thousands of Latinos who left the United States as second-class citizens and came back energized to claim equal footing in American society. They returned when racism and segregation were common and opportunities were not, and they began pouring the foundation for much of the Hispanic civil rights movement. Although their experiences formed a seminal moment in the nation's racial politics, Rivas-Rodriguez could not find systematic documentation of their lives. Then a reporter for the Dallas Morning News, she saw that the Latino face was largely absent from scholarly research, mass media and the national celebration of The Greatest Generation. Rivas-Rodriguez never intended for a flash of insight to dominate her work more than a decade later. But in 1999, with the help of a $36,000 grant from the A.H. Belo Corp. Foundation, she founded the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project at the University of Texas.

Project workers, researchers and volunteers have spent five years tracking down Latino and Latina veterans and families, taping their stories, copying their personal photographs and publishing a newspaper.

The endeavor has given voice to a generation in hundreds of from-the-heart testimonies; stories of bravery on the battlefield, of confronting racism at home and in the military, and of life-altering experiences after the war. The project's work has been an agonizing race against time. Many from that generation are dying.

But researchers have managed to accumulate a rich vein of history into which others can tap, and now are embarking on a new chapter -- publishing books based on the interviews.

Meanwhile, a play inspired by the stories is in development, and scholars from across the country will gather Sunday at a public forum in Washington to give presentations based on themes gleaned from the histories. Latinos of that war's generation finally are getting their due, says Rivas-Rodriguez, who teaches journalism at UT, where the history project is part of the journalism school and Center for Mexican American Studies.
"Really, it was WWII that was the watershed (for Latino civil rights) because it gave people the tools they could use so they could go through the system," Rivas-Rodriguez said.

During interviews conducted across the country, researchers found poignant treasures in stories such as the one told by Diego Campa of Newton, Kan., the son of Mexican immigrants. At 16, Campa dropped out of high school, ostensibly to work but also to escape the racism he knew in the classroom and even in church. When he later was drafted into the Army and assigned to the European Theater, Campa was bitterly disappointed to learn that the Army was not a refuge.

Jean Davis was not Hispanic, but she married Alfred Avalos, a Mexican American, in Mineral Wells and learned for the first time that there was a difference in the way some people treated Latinos and Anglos. Landlords welcomed her when she shopped for apartments. When she returned with her husband, the apartments were suddenly unavailable. Two months after marrying, Avalos was drafted into the Army. He was wounded during the 1944 Battle of the Bulge and awarded a Purple Heart. The Avalos found happiness together.

Not every tale is of combat or struggles against bigotry. Some stories are rich in insights into what daily life was like for Latinos. What's important, Rivas-Rodriguez says, is that the stories are being told and that new generations are discovering the foresight and the sacrifices of the World War II generation.

"Our children, all children, need to grow up knowing of the contributions of all Americans," she said.

Becoming Americans

"That whole postwar phenomenon is something historians have not looked at very carefully," says Jose Limon, the director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at UT.

Among the history project's greatest successes, Limon says, is capturing how a generation of children of Mexican immigrants "simultaneously laid claim to American citizenship and American identity. They became very fundamentally Americans. At all sorts of levels, not the least (of) which is that participation probably enhanced the acquisition of English."

Latinos, mostly Mexican Americans at the time, had railed before against discrimination and school segregation. But the World War II soldiers returned home and used the GI Bill of Rights to get college educations and buy their first homes. They became lawyers, professionals or civil-service employees. They founded the American GI Forum and later the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, organizations that promoted civil rights through advocacy, education and outreach, and the legal system. They secured advancements in school desegregation and in voting rights.

Joanne Sanchez, a professor of history at St. Edward's University who will speak about "Women and the Home Front" at the Washington forum, says the war also had a transforming effect on Latina identity.

Some women served overseas, others helped at home, working in defense plants or volunteering for the United Service Organization. They told of enduring discrimination while growing up.
"I think our young men and women found out they were just as good as anyone. . . . They realized they were just as American as any other American here," Elena De Pea, a Corpus Christi nurse originally from San Benito told project interviewers. "We might have been a little darker, but that didn't make any difference. What mattered was 'what did we have to offer?'"

Staging oral histories
Rivas-Rodriguez likes to say that the 450-and-counting stories she and a hundred or so students have collected in interviews are so rich, "Any one of them would make a great movie."

Or a play. James Garcia, a former Austinite, is mining the oral histories for the stage. "You can't write this dialogue," he said. "These are not actors. These are people who speak the way they speak because they come from the place they come from."

Tentatively called "Voices of Valor: Hispanics in World War II," his play will premiere in Phoenix in 2005, followed by a performance at UT in 2006 and, after that, a possible national tour. Since 1999, the interviews and hundreds of historical photos loaned by the subjects and their families have filled the fat issues of Narratives, the oral history project's signature newspaper. The history project will continue to accept interviews, but they will appear in a shorter newsletter.

Narratives, which published a final 112-page edition this summer, was just one component of the project, Rivas-Rodriguez says. The real substance, that which will have lasting value, is the video and audio tapes of interviews conducted at homes and in veterans centers, in places like Millersville, Md.; Albuquerque, N.M.; Kansas City, Mo.; Saginaw, Mich.; and Brownsville. The tapes, and the files that accompany them, will become an archive of source material to be housed at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at UT. Duplicate videotapes will be housed at the Center for American History at UT.

The project's shift from publishing a newspaper to writing and publishing books should attract a wider audience as well as address the glaring gaps in the historical record. Forthcoming books will draw from the interviews and from thousands of black-and-white historical photographs. The presentations at the Washington forum could spawn an edited volume.

"Mexican Americans and World War II," due in 2005 from the University of Texas Press, will be the first book to come out of the history project, though it is not based on the actual interviews. The World War II generation's achievements were extraordinary and opened doors for their children. Rivas-Rodriguez says. "It's not that our generation is any smarter than that generation. It's that we had opportunities made available to us because of their sacrifices. Because they were willing to stand up and take the heat."

jcastillo@statesman.com; 445-3635
(from box)

Sunday commemoration
The commemorative forum on Latinos and Latinas in World War II will be held Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the U.S. Navy Memorial Foundation Naval Heritage Center theatre, 701 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C.

The Hispanic Heritage Month event is based on themes from the U.S. Latino & Latino WWII Oral History Project at the University of Texas. It is free and open to the public.
Presenters will address a wide range of topics, including, "Evolution of Civil Rights Consciousness during WWII," "Civil Rights and Mexican Americans," "The Effects of War on Latina Identity," and "Mexican Nationals in the U.S. Military."

For information contact Yazmin Lazcano, project assistant at 471-1924 or e-mail latinoarchives@www.utexas.edu

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