

# Capturing memories of Latinos, World War II

**BYLINE:** Arnold Garcia Jr.

**DATE:** September 27, 1999

**PUBLICATION:** Austin American-Statesman (TX)

**EDITION:** Final

**SECTION:** Editorial

**PAGE:** A9

They weren't old men back in the 1950s. They were still young and sometimes boisterous and occasionally somber when they recalled the mutual experience that had shaped them. They would sit, drinking, smoking and remembering -- remembering being taken a long way from home to learn to perform unfamiliar tasks. They remembered then and still what their little piece of history looked like in what Studs Terkel called the "Last Good War." When I was a kid, I soaked up the stories my father and his friends would spin about those days. Their stories centered on their training, tough sergeants, buddies, memorable pay-day antics, winning and losing poker hands. No one talked about combat much. I will never forget my father's paradoxical comment about how World War II saved his life. Before the war, his view of the future was one of long rows of cotton that needed picking. The war had given him a glimpse of an alternate destiny and a shot at the education to achieve it. World War II was a turning point for many people, many groups, but the changes the war forged for Mexican Americans in the Southwest were profound. The war had given my parents' generation of Mexican Americans the confidence to challenge the old ways of the old Texas, where signs that read "No dogs or Mexicans allowed" and the attitude behind them were a constant. The GI Generation changed that. Those of us who grew up with them know the story. Unfortunately, as the men and women who reshaped Texas after the war leave us, the story leaves with them. Enter **Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez**, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin. She has mounted an ambitious effort -- to put together a symposium on the Latino experience in World War II complete with a photo exhibit, oral histories, expert panels, the works and pull it off by May 26. It's a daunting task and one in which students will be mobilized to become the infantry, seeking out the pictures and the stories of those who participated in the war against fascism that ended and mounted the attack on bigotry that endures. To be candid, she was reluctant to talk much about the two-day project because she doesn't have the staff she needs to handle the response. The concept got some ink in the San Antonio Express-News this summer, she recalled, and she was overwhelmed by the volume of calls and letters she got. People couldn't wait to tell their stories. And that's why she can't wait much longer. A brochure has been put together calling for academic papers for the symposium to be called "U.S. Latinos & World War II: Changes Seen, Changes Wrought." Rivas-Rodriguez, 44, like many of her contemporaries, grew up with the story and is surprised to find that interest in World War II is as strong as it is. Estimates are that 500,000 Latinos served in World War II, and it's said that Latinos were the highest decorated ethnic group to serve. They served in all theaters and in all capacities and as officers and enlisted personnel. There were aviators, there were infantrymen, they were Marines, sailors, medics, military police. You name the job, Latinos helped do it. You wouldn't know that from the movies (one notable exception:

Ricardo Montalban's character in 1949's ``Battleground." He was killed about 30 minutes into the film.). You wouldn't know it from television, and you wouldn't know it from much of the mainstream literature. ``Sadly, the stories of these men and women have been virtually untold, either in the mass media or in scholarly writings. The main problem has been the small numbers of U.S. Latino journalists, scholars and other writers who would document the lives of this generation. This project seeks to capture the words of these men and women," the brochure reads. The professor wants to help tell those stories before they are lost for good. I want to help, too. The e-mail address for Rivas-Rodriguez is latinoarchives@www.utexas.edu. You'll find mine below. By the way, that's her mom and dad in the photo. The year was 1942.

Garcia is the editorial page editor of the Austin American-Statesman. You may contact him at [agarcia@statesman.com](mailto:agarcia@statesman.com) or 445-3667.

**Illustration:** Photo courtesy **Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez**

PHOTO

Henrietta and Ramon Rivas, still married more than 50 years after this photo was taken.

*Copyright (c) 1999 Austin American-Statesman*