



The Zoot Suit Riots of June 1943

The Zoot Suit Riots were a series of escalating street fights from June 3–8, 1943 in Los Angeles, California, between American servicemen and Mexican-American youths. The violence started after a year of harassment and increasingly violent attacks on US servicemen by Mexican Americans. **Mexicans were 100% responsible for the 'Zoot Suit' riots.** There were four factors that lead up to the violence.

The first factor was competition over women. Thousands of servicemen were arriving in Los Angeles to be shipped to the Pacific theater and these servicemen crowded into local dance halls and night clubs to pick up women - often Mexican American women. This created tensions with Mexican American young men. Some Mexicans would start fist-fights with sailors who tried to flirt with Mexican girls.

Second, Zoot suits had become popular in the early 1940s among many Mexican Americans in Los Angeles - a flamboyant long jacket with balloon-leg pants, cuffed at the bottom. During World War Two, rationing of fabric was required for the war effort. Regulations prohibited the manufacturing of zoot suits because they used an excessive amount of material, but a network of bootleg tailors continued to manufacture them. This created instant animosity with Mexican American youths wearing the zoot suits. They were seen as un-American because they were deliberately violating the rationing regulations. That the "zoot suiters" were not in the military caused further resentment.

The third factor was the Sleepy Lagoon murder. In the summer of 1942, the city was becoming increasingly concerned with youth violence among Mexican Americans. When José Díaz was discovered unconscious and dying on a road near a swimming hole (known as the Sleepy Lagoon) in Commerce, California, on the morning of August 2, 1942, these fears were confirmed. Seventeen Mexican youths were tried for murder. With thousands of Mexicans moving into the area for the Bracero program(1), this murder heightened fears that gang violence was increasing.

On January 15, 1943, despite little evidence, the jury found 3 of the youths guilty of first-degree murder, 9 guilty of second-degree murder, and 5 guilty of assault. The remaining five were found not guilty. All the convictions were later overturned.

The fourth factor was the location of the Naval Reserve Training School. Latinos had long been informally segregated to areas such as Chavez Ravine - an area of about 315 acres.



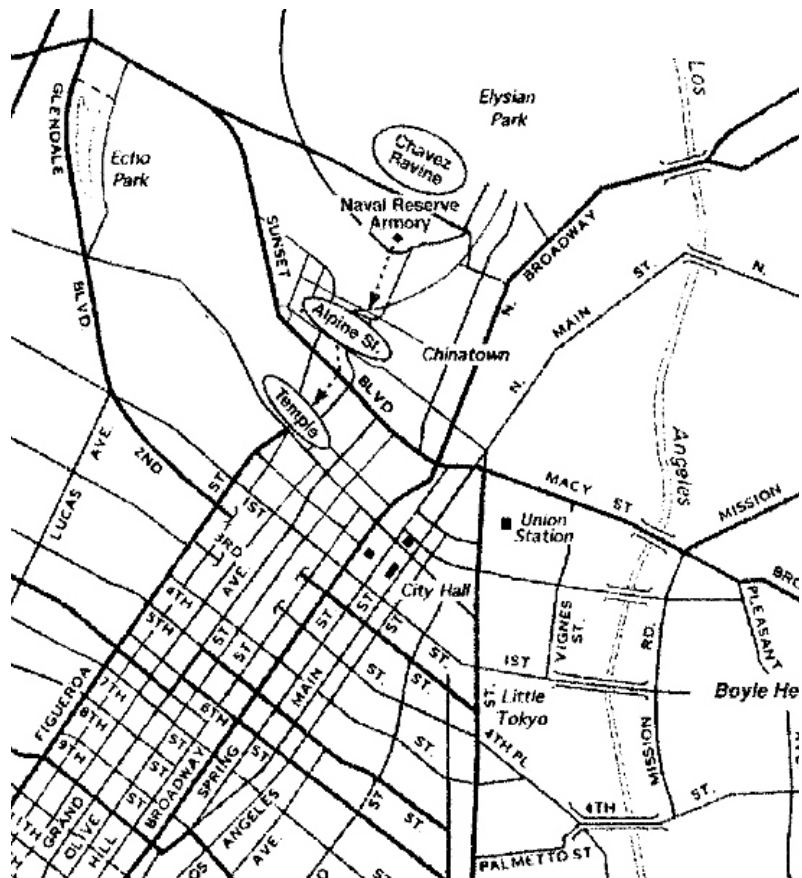
Zoot Suit(6)

With Japan and Germany becoming imperialistic in the 1930s, President Roosevelt, a former assistant secretary of the navy, began pushing a national military preparedness campaign. When a citizens' group proposed a "reserve training armory" for sailors in the Los Angeles area, FDR backed the idea. The navy selected Chavez Ravine in January 1935 from a list of 40 suggestions for its natural defensive position "inconspicuously nestled in the hills where raiding bombers in a possible attack by enemy air forces will be least likely to damage it."(2)

The center took only 4.5 acres. Construction started on April 22, 1938 and the building was dedicated on October 1940.(2) Some have argued that this set the stage for confrontations with servicemen when the center opened - but there were no protests from residents when construction started in 1938.

Servicemen had to go through Mexican American areas in order to go downtown - see map.(3) Mexican youth considered their neighborhoods to be their turf. Servicemen - who were from all around the country and unaccustomed to gang "turf wars" - assumed the area was public and open to anyone.

One of the first conflicts between the sailors and the zoot suiters was in August 1942. A sailor and his girlfriend were walking when four zoot suiters blocked the sidewalk in front of them. The zoot suiters refused to let them pass and pushed the sailor into the street. The zoot-suiters and the sailor stood their ground in silence until finally, the sailor backed away.(3)



And there were many more incidents. "One Mexican American man reportedly told a white sailor who walked into the Tip Toe Inn in East Los Angeles that it was unhealthy for him to eat there. The sailor hesitated, and the civilian responded: "If you don't leave now you will be in one fucking mess when you get in town--if you are able to get there after we are through with you."(3)

As Electrician's Mate Third Class Domenick Valleta walked along Alpine near Broadway in late May 1943, a carload of young Mexicans, some reportedly dressed in zoot suits, drove close to the curb and spat upon him. "Son of a bitch!" "Bastard!" they yelled as they drove off.(3)

That same afternoon Seaman Second Class James Jerome Graner walked along Figueroa Boulevard and encountered a group of young Mexicans dressed in zoot suits at the corner of Temple and Figueroa. "There's another one of those sons of bitches," someone called out, and someone spat upon the sailor as he turned around and headed back to the armory.(3)

In the months prior to the outbreak of mob violence in June 1943, sailors, their wives, and their friends all reported a growing number of hostile encounters with Mexican youth in the area surrounding the armory. Other servicemen reported that Mexican Americans often blocked their access to dance halls, theaters, or restaurants or chased after them as they walked in the public areas of town."(3)

Mexican Americans living and working in the areas surrounding the armory routinely denounced and ridiculed military men. The great majority of comments and epithets from Mexicans revolved around three central themes. Some ridiculed patriotism by suggesting that servicemen were fools because there were so many ways to avoid military service. Others questioned the bravery of sailors by asking if they had joined the Navy to avoid facing combat duty. And finally a number of young men hurled sexually explicit taunts at sailors that called into question their heterosexual manhood status. The favorite denunciation of servicemen by Mexican youth was c - - k sucker.(3)

By May 1943, confrontations with Mexicans had become a daily event - sometimes two and three times a day. Mexicans also became more brazen in their attacks on sailors. Prior to the spring of 1943, most confrontations consisted of name calling, but now the confrontations were becoming increasingly violent.

Seamen Second Class Robert Lafayette Calkins, Wallace Stetich, and Benny Claire Boatright, each of whom had previous encounters with civilian youth, were all walking down Figueroa one Tuesday in May. Upon arriving at the area just north of Sunset Boulevard, four young men dressed in zoot suits crossed from the opposite side of the street and approached the sailors from straight ahead. As the civilian youth drew nearer, some of the boys broke beer bottles over the edge of a nearby garbage can and pointed the jagged edges at the sailors like knives. The two groups faced off as they slowly walked past one another in tense silence.”(3)

Four days before the riot started, on Monday night, 31 May 1943, around 8:00 P.M. a dozen sailors and soldiers strolled together down Main Street, and among them was Seaman Second Class Joe Dacy Coleman, U. S.N. Near New Chinatown the military men spotted a group of young women on the opposite sidewalk, and the group of military men--with the exception of Coleman and a soldier--crossed the street to approach the women. Coleman continued on, walking past a small gathering of young men dressed in zoot suits. As he passed one of them, Coleman saw out the corner of his eye a boy raising his arm in a manner that Coleman took to be threatening. The sailor quickly spun around and seized the young man's arm, but someone or something immediately struck Coleman on the head from behind. He fell to the ground unconscious, breaking his jaw in two places. On the other side of the street Mexicans attacked the servicemen with rocks, bottles and fists. Yet the servicemen managed to fight their way over to where Coleman lay and drag him off to safety.

An undated letter from an unknown serviceman shows that they were done being nice to Mexicans: “Say what the hell is being done about these god-damn Mexican punks, I think the city officials and police are scared of them ... They are certainly raising hell in L.A. raping women and knifing lone soldiers, one of our men came back to the outfit all cut up and its [sic] really getting us hot. This will naturally lead to a bunch of our men going into L.A. and there will be a lot of sorry Mexicans ... I for one would kill any of them that hurt anybody I know in L.A. I don't see why the army doesn't just go in and take the situation over, because the police can't handle it. We have wives and sweethearts there, and the soldiers won't stand for much more of this s---t.”(3)

A little after 6:00 P.M. on Thursday evening, 3 June 1943. About 16 Navy men exited a bus on Sunset Boulevard and began to walk northward along Figueroa Boulevard toward the armory. As the sailors came to the corner of Alpine and Figueroa, two young men dressed in zoot suits reportedly shouted across the intersection: "Sons of bitches and bastards!" The pair of Mexicans shook their fists at the sailors and called them "mother f--kers.”(3)

About the time these sailors arrived at the armory gates a couple of other sailors left the compound and headed toward town on Adobe. Not far from the armory they ran into two "Mexican" girls and four boys dressed in zoot suits who reportedly accosted the sailors with a tirade of foul language. During the verbal assault on the sailors some of the Mexicans reportedly raised their hands in the Nazi salute and shouted out: "Heil Hitler!"(3)

Historical accounts about the Zoot Suit Riots seldom show injured servicemen - only Mexicans. Here are some pictures showing injuries from Mexican gangsters.



A Marine, Robert Egan, received a fractured skull in the fighting.(4)



Bette Morgan was mugged and cut up by a group of Mexicans.(4)



A sailor, Donald Jackson, 20, was slashed in his abdomen by Mexicans.(4)

This last incident was the final straw. The months of ridicule and attacks had reached the breaking point. No more running away. The police couldn't stop the attacks and the harassment, verbal abuse and brutality against servicemen was getting worse. Americans were now going to teach these punks a lesson in respect.

Later in the evening of 3 June 1943, about 50 sailors stationed at the Naval Reserve Training School, many now carrying clubs in case Mexicans had broken bottles, stormed through the Mexican American neighborhoods that lay between the school and downtown L.A. looking for anyone in a zoot suit.(3)

Their actions that night, which consisted mostly of stripping zoot suits off young men, set off a week of violence as thousands of military personnel poured into Los Angeles from the surrounding bases and attacked anyone wearing zoot suits, but most put their zoot suits away. Servicemen then began hunting for any young Mexican male.

The violence didn't end until June 9, when U.S. military personnel were barred from leaving their barracks. The police were no more able to protect Mexicans from servicemen during the riots then they were able to protect servicemen from Mexicans over the preceeding year. Amazingly, no one was killed during the violence.

Most historians claim that Anti-Mexican racism by white servicemen caused the Zoot Suit riots. NOT true. **The racists were the Mexicans. It was the constant harassment and attacks on servicemen by Mexicans from 1942 through June 1943 that caused the riots.** If Mexican Americans hadn't attacked servicemen for over a year, there would never have been a "riot." Servicemen were the victims here. After all, servicemen were putting their lives on the line to protect the very civilians who beat and robbed them.

Typical of today's revisionists historians, Mexicans who 'protected' their turf from outsiders are not condemned, rather given justification for their gang activities. *"Although deservedly criticized and much denounced during this period, "gang wars" served as one of the socializing agents through which mostly young males marked and measured themselves through the intimacy of violence."*(3)

It must be pointed out that many incidents occurred in the public downtown areas, not Mexican American 'turf.'

Revisionist historians also claim the violence should be called a 'military riot.' These phoney historians are wrong on this too. Servicemen did not burn down or damage buildings or attack police. They didn't loot stores. Servicemen were doing what they were going to war with Japan to do - engage in violence to bring peace. Servicemen attacked their attackers.

Source:

1. The bracero program was an agreement between the US and Mexico that allowed Mexicans into the US to work farm fields during World War Two and then after the war.
2. Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center Los Angeles by Bruce R. Lively
3. Los Angeles Geopolitics and the Zoot Suit Riot, 1943, by Eduardo Obregón Pagán, pub 2000, p223-250
Pagan appears to have produced a well researched paper. However, he is very biased in favor of Mexican Americans despite producing overwhelming evidence in his own paper that proves Mexicans were the instigators of the escalating violence against servicemen. He ignores his own evidence and declares the riots a result of white racism, 'white privilege' and defends Mexican gangs attacking servicemen intruding into 'their turf.'
4. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/zoot-suit-riots>
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-LmooHLhAY&list=RDxckD780EYOY&index=3> (at 4:40)
6. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/los-angeles-1943-war-on-the-zoot-suit>

Sal Sandervol, a Mexican American who was 16 during the riots explained: *"They never figured on knives. That's what we started doing - knifing them."*(5)



Police hold up weapons confiscated from men in zoot suits.(4)



THIS is a riot.