

Interviewee: Sarabia, Emilio

Interview Date: November 3, 2004

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
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Interviewee: Dr. Emilio Sarabia
Interview Date: November 3, 2004
Place: In his home, Pearland, Texas
Interviewer: Leigh Cutler
Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

The family of Dr. Emilio Sarabia, a retired physician at the time of the interview, was one of the earliest to arrive in Houston. His father was one who opened the first theater for Spanish language movies, the Azteca Theatre presently located across from Minute Maid Park. The other family members opened a variety of businesses that settled in the area on the northern side of Downtown Houston that was then known as "Little Mexico." Sarabia focuses on the concern surrounding the maintenance of culture and language within the Mexican immigrant community and how Salon Juarez provided a community center where children could learn and freely speak Spanish, where dances and meetings could be held. Emilio describes the different Hispanic communities located around Houston and his experiences growing up as a Mexican in a mixed Anglo community. Preservation efforts surrounding Salon Juarez have faced difficulties and Emilio provides insight on his work with Tejano preservation associations and gives his opinion on what should become of Salon Juarez if it obtains a historical landmark status.

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Dr. Emilio Sarabia
Mexican-American History

Interviewed by: Leigh Cutler
Date: November 3, 2004
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: In his home, Pearland, Texas.

LC: This is Leigh Cutler interviewing Dr. Emilio Sarabia about the Salon Juarez Magnolia Hall in the east end in Houston. The interview is taking place at Dr. Sarabia's home, _____ Pearland, Texas. The date is November 3, 2004. Okay, Dr. Sarabia if you could start off and just tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your family and how you came to Houston?

ES: Sure, okay. First of all I am a native Houstonian. I was born in what you call Second Ward on Durazno Street. My father was a pioneer, a Hispanic merchant and he and his brothers established several businesses on Congress Avenue, Preston Avenue, mainly book stores, grocery stores, import stores and just different items. They were successful.

LC: Tell me a little bit about where or how they came to be involved with Salon Juarez?

ES: Well first of all my family was not involved with the Salon Juarez it was my wife's aunt who grew up in the neighborhood. Like I said I was born in Second Ward and basically I've been an East End boy all my life. My wife was born in an area of town called Magnolia and this area is predominantly Hispanic. It was established many years back.

Most of these homes were north of Harrisburg and a lot of these homes were built by the Hispanic immigrants. The Salon Juarez the way I understand it was established for us to

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maintain the culture and the language of the Mexican people. We had several prominent leaders that were concerned about the school systems that demanded that all English needed to be spoken, with no bilingual education at all. These gentlemen that I am familiar with got to know some of them was Mr. Elias Ramirez and Mr. Jose Medellin, they have large families and naturally they are very concerned about maintaining some of their culture from Mexico, especially the language. So they took it upon themselves. The Salon Juarez was established by a mutual aid society and they helped the community. That particular salon was used for different purposes other than just a meeting place. They were concerned about the lack of emphasis or the mission of anything that has to do with the Mexican-American heritage. They took it upon themselves to hire first one sister and two sisters from Mexico who came to the United States under a sponsorship and they were able to establish a school for the kids in the neighborhood, not so much to teach them education, but to maintain the Spanish language. They emphasized not only knowledge or education of Mexican culture but also other cultures of the world. Magnolia Park is located near the ship channel so it has always been a very busy area where seaman would come in from different ships: Japanese, Chinese, Lebanese, African, and of course German. It was always surge of traffic going back and forth. My aunt, I call her my aunt but she's actually my wife's aunt, Elisa Flores was a child of Mr. Medellin and she shared with me some of her experiences with this particular salon - salon is actually a meeting place. One thing that she shared with me was the fact that one day a Japanese merchant happened to be walking by and he noticed that the children were studying the culture of Japan. They were trying to put on a play about Japan; which back in those days was a land that you only read about.

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He was intrigued because they were getting ready to put on a Japanese play. He somehow or another communicated to them that he wanted to help them. He went back to the ship and brought back some Japanese kimonos, some Japanese costumes and that helped them appreciate the Japanese culture themselves, too. My aunt tells me that this was a place where young people could meet, the young men, even though at that time, I'm talking about the thirties and forties, they had gangs of boys that would just roam around but if they were ever in this particular salon they would be required to wear shirts and behave themselves which I think was a nice environment for them to meet other people. Basically this was a place where they had meetings for their mutual aid society, they had dances there, they had educational process there and I basically came into the scene later on as President of Tejano Association for Social Preservation along with Mr. Romo. Mr. Romo was the first President, I was the second President. We have tried to maintain our culture and certainly do our research on some of the buildings that were important growing up. For example, my family, my Uncle Jose and Dr. Leyva and a farmer named Penales started the first successful Hispanic theater, called the Azteca Theater and this is now located directly across the street from the present day Minute Maid Park. I have had a good fortune to help out at one of the stores that we had there. It was a community, a centro, we call it "el centro" where we could speak our language, we felt very comfortable being there and we had a theater where we could see Mexican movies. We could go to my dad's store and see all of the spices, things from Mexico; books from Mexico.

LC: When was this?

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ES: In the forties. My family established the theater in 1927 and of course they kept it for about five or eight years and then the sound movies came on and they had to get out of it because it was very expensive to maintain. But they were always, I would say, cultural leaders in the society. Neighborhoods were divided into different areas, different pockets of Hispanics. There's the Second Ward where I was born and I moved out of there; there's the North Side which is North Main; there is Magnolia, which is near the ship channel; there is also Kashmere Gardens where a neighborhood called El Crisol was also a little pocket of Hispanics. Some way or another we were able to feel comfortable in our environments. I myself, when I went to school did not speak a word of English. It was actually moving out of our neighborhood into a mixed neighborhood of Anglo speaking and of course Spanish speaking that I picked up the language of English.

LC: How old were you when that happened?

ES: Well as a matter of fact when my little brother, my big brother, took me to school he told me, "If you want to go to the bathroom tell them you're sick." I thought, "That's fine I can handle that." So I went to the register at the office to register of course, I has just kind of accepted, and she asked me, "Are you six?" I said "No." At that time I was real small so she sent me home so I didn't start school until I was seven years old. I wasn't ready for school anyway. Somehow or another I ran across some teachers that were kind enough to teach me the English language and I made a pretty a good student to say the least. So anything else?

LC: Yes. In the thirties and forties when you were talking about Salon Juarez do you know who was running it? Because I know that the Sociedad Mutualista had started it.

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ES: Right.

LC: When it was built in the 1928. I also read that they lost the hall in 1932. I was wondering who began to run it if you know, after that?

ES: The person who actually maintains it right now is Lalo Gonzales and he is the person you need to contact if you can ever get a hold of him.

LC: Oh, Castillo?

ES: Is it Castillo?

LC: Yes, I have spoken with him.

ES: Yeah right. He tells me his son owns it but his son wasn't paying taxes.

LC: Right.

ES: So either his mother or his aunt, they were able to get the money together and to pay off the taxes. Now Lalo has been able to clean it up, fix the inside of it quite a bit and that's about as far as I know about who the ownership is right now.

LC: Okay. So basically in the thirties and forties it was used, it was still being used for the same reason it was started as a mutual aid social society?

ES: Yeah, exactly.

LC: Then are you aware of when it kind of became not used anymore?

ES: Well one thing that kind of changed the use of it was the fact that across the street the Women's YMCA was established and they provided the same services and of course they were more _____ over to that particular area. Now like I said the Magnolia YMCA was established and most of the activities went under their direction. I do know that my father-in-law later became a member or the president of Benito Juarez Mutual Aid Society

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and they had bought a house and I think it's on Avenue J. They fixed it up and again they had little dances and meetings and tamales fundraisers and things like that. He was quite active in that particular organization along with my mother-in-law.

LC: Do you know at all before the building was built what was there on the land?

ES: Well most of the land there was vacant. It was just vacant lots and like I said I assumed that most of the homes were built in the twenties.

LC: So it was all coming up around the same time?

ES: Yeah, right. At that time like I said most of the homes that were south of Harrisburg were Anglo, real nice homes, Forest Park area, Mason Park area and so forth. The street was, as usual, as a barrier between races. This is where they started building houses. My wife's Uncle Thomas, I'm sure he helped several of the houses in the neighborhood. So it was a nice little area where brothers could live next to each other and they would communicate with each other and send the kids to school, to public schools. They had, of course a private school in the Catholic Church. My wife didn't go to it but she went to this other school. Of course, even then at that time I think she was there in the forties, she was forbidden to speak Spanish. She had to speak English all the time. She would be punished if she didn't. So in a way it was good because they had to learn the language that way, which was beneficial to them in the long run. English is my first language now instead of Spanish.

LC: Do you know if the perception of that building among the rest of the Houston communities was it fairly, because of its location and the community at the time, was it fairly isolated or were there issues of...?

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ES: No, it wasn't isolated because all kinds of Hispanic buildings were established here. There was a garage there, there was a pharmacy, there was a filling station run by Hispanics, grocery stores, night clubs, lots of grocery stores a lot of pop-and-mom grocery stores and variety stores. It was just a nice little community to grow up in.

LC: But there were just really, at the time there was no kind of assimilation going on, that it was still racially segregated?

ES: No, there was a time when the ship channel was growing by leaps and bounds so they could always find jobs there at the compress warehouses and I don't want to say they were longshoreman but they were able to help out and maintain their livelihood there.

LC: Okay tell me now a little bit about your involvement with the Tejano Preservation Association and the role that it's played since the nineties, I know you were involved with doing some work for the building?

ES: Well first of all I've met Mr. Romo a lot. I knew or later on found out that her family was kind of related to each other in a certain way.

LC: So it is his aunt that is your wife's aunt?

ES: It would probably be his aunt also. My wife's aunt is his aunt. Like I said...

LC: So they are cousins?

ES: Romo, he is more like my age, actually younger than I am so my aunt would be much older than he is. So she is a daughter of Mr. Medellin.

LC: Oh okay.

ES: It was his grandfather I guess.

LC: That's right okay.

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ES: Your question now?

LC: So you were talking about the Tejano Preservation Association.

ES: Right. I met him we had a little Hispanic exhibit at one of the sessions at the Genealogical Society or whatever and he recognized my name as "Sarabia" being a pioneer Hispanic and he invited me to join because he knew that my family had established the Azteca Theater and we were quite active in the community. So that's how I became interested and see what they had to say. I helped them quite a bit in helping to establish the landmark, for the landmark for Our Lady of Guadalupe church which was the first Hispanic landmark in Houston. Unfortunately, most of this was put together by Mr. Romo and when he got a job at the library he had to kind of drop out for a while and from my leadership and Jose's leadership we redirected our efforts in recognizing these historical sites but also recognizing people, Mexican American heroes like Caesar Chavez, like Juan Seguin, like Lorenzo Zavala; people that established or helped to established Texas a long time ago and they are more or less forgotten in history. I remember....the, growing up in Houston, we'd have to take Texas history along with American history. Of course we knew about the Alamo and the fact that the Mexicans were defeated; but no mention was made of any of Hispanic heroes that fought with the Alamo or were helping trying to fight the same battles that the Anglos were here. So we worked to make that better known. We had a street named for Caesar Chavez. We have had a lot of elementary schools named for Hispanic pioneers. We had...

LC: That's been the work of the Tejano Preservation?

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ES: Preservation right. Like I said I don't want to take credit for it because our succeeding president, like Mr. Benny Martinez has been quite active in that endeavor. Of course our present officers, Linda Saenz and Loretta Williams have been active in doing their thing. As a matter of fact I would like to share with you the newsletter that I have where they have some information about the Salon Juarez.

LC: Okay great.

ES: And you are welcome to take them with you.

LC: Thank you. So now I understand you all tried to work for getting a historic landmark for the Salon Juarez, what was the obstacle in doing that?

ES: Well finding the owner, finding out who the actual owner was. That was one of our... in the landmark for the Azteca Theater was one, that was supposed to be my job but I never got around to doing it, unfortunately. The other was, of course, Caesar Chavez and then the third one was the Salon Juarez. Like I said we lost the leadership of Mr. Romo because he was the one that was primarily interested in that particular project. I guess because of his job he cannot get to it with his outside activities with that being affected, let's put it that way.

LC: So now in terms of getting that marker it's just an issue with the owner?

ES: Yes. Well I think Mr. Romo has established the fact that it is much easier to get a City of Houston historical marker then it is to having to go to the Texas Historical Society. In other words you have to submit an application, you have to find out who the architect is, and the complete history about it and the owner has to give permission to have that done

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also. So, Mr. Castillo may have other plans to the use of it. Because once it is declared a historical landmark whatever, you can't change the structure too much.

LC: Oh is that...?

ES: He may not be ready to invest his time and money and not put it to better use. So that is something that has to be worked out with Mr. Romo and Mr. Castillo and I will help any way I can, but I'm a consultant right now for the Tejano Association right now. So I will give you a newsletter and you can read about that.

LC: Okay. So obviously you think the building is worth preserving?

ES: Yes, right. Of course some of the people are dying but it is definitely a building that should be preserved. I mean I'm not saying that we have a lot of Hispanic historical sites but we've got to start somewhere.

LC: If it does come to a time when it is preserved and restored, who do you think should use it? What should become of it after that?

ES: Well, I think it could easily be maintained to establish some sort of business like a lawyers' office or even a museum. This is up to the owner. I don't know what his resources are but I'm sure it could be suggested to him that it would be a good idea to set aside some part of it for a historical museum. There are a lot of people interested in people right now, like you. As a matter of fact a case in point is my wife and I in October said, "You know need to go out there and have some German food somewhere." So I said, "Yeah I guess so that old German restaurant is still open off of _____, I think I know how to get there." So sure enough we got over there on Sunday afternoon we took care of the grandkids and the kids and so forth and almost got into a wreck trying to change real quickly on a lane. So we got

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down there on the little street everything was completely changed, Panamanians and _____ and we came to a building that was boarded up and immediately I recognized it as the old German restaurant where you could hear “umpapa” music or any German music and so forth. So it was a little bit of sadness we turned around and said, “Well let’s go somewhere else; how about Chinese food?”

LC: Well that’s too bad. Well I think that the idea of a museum is a good one. So basically what is left to be done to get to that point is it really an issue being privately owned and it’s difficult to get sort of the community?

ES: Well I think people like yourself if you could get the word out that it is important and of course mention to people that get involved with it this time and maybe there will be a grass roots within the community that say... There are several mutual aid societies that live, that meet close by and the church is close by. I mean some of those churches are Protestant and Catholic so forth, I’m sure some leadership could come from them. Let’s face it, Houston is a melting pot, you know, more so then any other city. This is where people go to get assimilated into the great melting pot. Just like any other neighborhood was available for the Germans and Italians and the Greeks and the Hispanics and the Blacks and so forth. So we all have our little bit of history where we feel comfortable with and proud of to say the least. I guess the main thing they were holding back is the fact that people, like me, having good intentions but not necessarily wealthy enough to say, “Okay let’s contribute X number of dollars here and go from there.” There are people, Hispanics, just like there are African-Americans that can know where they can get these resources, through government grants, from foundations and so forth. People like educators like Mr.

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Romo, at this time his resources are kind of limited, but maybe the next generation will get their act together and get this done.

LC: You say melting pot and it is interesting because now the east end itself, is kind of becoming, seems to be turning more toward that being a melting pot on it's own so it seems like preserving that building, to preserve that history would be...

ES: Right well when I was growing up, through segregation and we know we were segregated because you didn't mention the word Mexicans; you know Mexican was like a dirty word. We would say, "We're Spanish." My aunt would tell me, "Tell them you're Italian." Of course we never did that but I could see where she was coming from. Because she was welcomed into society a lot better than we did. But we felt like we were kind of, not disadvantaged but at least we are better off than the blacks were because we never had to sit in the back of the bus and we could sit maybe in the middle and just be quiet, keep our place and so forth, not talk Spanish of course. So we were willing to just kind of stay in our place more or less. As we got educated and we learned the fact that there were contributions by the _____ that were here to begin with and how Texas history was changed as the immigration of Anglos would come into place and we learned historically about all the conflicts that we've had along the border where the Mexican people were never trusted because they were Mexicans to say the least. Their loyalty was questioned you know. Unfortunately many of our uncles and brothers went to the World War II, and the Korean War and Vietnam and gave up their lives just to, maybe prove the fact that they were good as anybody else and of course some of them paid with their lives. But

fortunately many came back and got a college education or at least a desire to better

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themselves and melt into the melting pot a lot better. So it is a changing thing, sometimes changes are difficult but I think it's for the better. I had six kids and I am fortunate that they have been able to be accepted into the general public because of their educational background and the fact that they are good kids.

LC: Well I think that's all the questions I have unless there is anything else you'd like to...

ES: Well unless, like I said, I can arrange a meeting with my aunt. She gets a little bit confused sometimes. As a matter of fact are you familiar with Mr. Fisher, Jim Fisher?

LC: No.

ES: He is at the University of Houston TV station.

LC: Oh.

ES: One time I was asking if she would like to have a talk with him and she was _____ but somehow or another it came about but she is an interesting person to say the least.

LC: Was she the one that was interviewed for the Chronicle article?

ES: Yes.

LC: And there was a little picture of her?

ES: Right. So she is kind of embarrassed, "I hope I said the right things."

LC: Yeah sure. I'm not sure you mentioned it but what year were you born if you don't mind me asking?

ES: 1932.

LC: 1932 okay. That's it. Thank you.

End of Interview

