

Tigua Indians and El Paso at the Texas State Centennial Exposition, Part I

By Nicholas P. Houser

The 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition was the biggest statewide celebration in Texas history. El Paso and the Tigua Indian were well represented at the exposition, which helps make El Pasoans, Texans, and Americans aware of the region's multicultural heritage. The Tigua Indians of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo participated in the Texas State Fairs of 1890, 1899, and 1936. This participation initiated public awareness of the Tigua within the region and the state. Tribal involvement was related to activities that promoted the El Paso area and publicized the region's cultural heritage, agricultural wealth, and economic resources.

State Fairs of 1890 and 1899

The *Herald-Post* described Tigua preparations for the 1890 fair thus:

> There are about 50 Pueblo Indians being trained at Ysleta, who will take to the State Fair at Dallas in October, by H.G. Bosong. The men are being drilled in all sorts of Indian sports and boys are getting to be experts in the art of bow and arrows. They will be dressed in Indian fashion and it is expected will attract much attention at the fair. The American boys of Ysleta, are learning the use of the bow and arrow and can now kill rabbits, birds, etc., as trophies of their skills.[1]

It is known that Cacique Manuel Ortega traveled by train with several tribal members to the Dallas State Fair, other than that simple fact, little is known about Tigua participation in the early fairs because of the limited historical record.

In 1899, the tribe again participated in the state fair. An account of that activity reflects the cultural insensitivity of the period: "A car load [train] of Indians and squaws left Monday to be exhibited at the Dallas Fair. They were dressed with the usual costumes and attracted a great deal of attention."[2] The statement suggests that the tribal delegation was exhibited as an object of curiosity rather than as participants in a cultural activity.

Preparing for the Texas Centennial

The 1936 Texas Centennial observance was the first time that El Paso and Texas acknowledged the tribe's contributions to the development of the region and state. In the past, Tigua participation at public events was considered entertaining and exotic, but of little importance to the greater community.[3] Many Texans of Native American, African-American and Hispanic ancestry considered the 1936 Centennial Exposition in Dallas as an important milestone in Texas history because it acknowledged and celebrated the state's multicultural heritage.[4]

Interest in the 1936 Texas Centennial began in the 1920's, although most of the planning was achieved from 1933 to 1934. Dallas was selected over San Antonio and Houston to host the exposition. The Centennial Exposition was many things—a state fair, a world's fair, and a centennial exposition. The Texas constitution was amended to permit the allocation of monies for a large-scale exposition. In 1935, the state legislature and the federal government contributed $3,000,000 each to the celebration.[5] The Commission of Control for the Texas Centennial encouraged secondary celebratory activities across the state. The exposition was put together in only fourteen months at the cost of twenty-five million dollars.

The Commission wanted to launch an extensive building program to attract tourists, to improve roads, and to build impressive monuments and museums.[6] The organization received funding from the Texas Legislature to provide limited financial support to local organizations within the state and Texas cities were encour-

aged to submit proposals for state funding of the centennial by September 1, 1934.

El Pasoans complained that centennial funding was prejudicial. In October 1935, the Chamber of Commerce charged that the commission offered El Paso only a thousand dollars for the erection of a Texas Ranger monument.[7] Wallace Perry, El Paso state Centennial Commission representative, objected that the advisory board of the Texas Historians discriminated against west Texans. El Paso Mayor R.E. Sherman accompanied a city delegation to Austin to request that the commission approve the city's application for $150,000. Shortly thereafter, the town was awarded $50,000 to be spent by the local committee without bureaucratic restrictions.[8]

El Paso Plans Centennial Activities

El Paso's centennial planning was challenged by the Great Depression. Municipal, county, and state budgets were severely limited but federal relief monies funded some centennial programs. Wherever possible, the private sector was asked to support centennial activities.[9]

State funding guidelines restricted funding to permanent projects such as buildings, statues, and markers, but not for pageantry. With the $50,000 El Paso received from the state for local centennial projects, the town proposed to construct a welcome house to serve tourists.[10] It was to be designed in the mission architectural style. Another project was to construct an exposition building at Washington Park.

State funding guidelines restricted funding to permanent projects such as buildings, statues, and markers, but not for pageantry. With the $50,000 El Paso received from the state for local centennial projects, the town proposed to construct a welcome house to serve tourists.[10] It was to be designed in the mission architectural style.

The Chamber of Commerce centennial committee was granted authority to select a permanent project for the El Paso area. The committee agreed to build a Memorial Arts Building at one of four recommended locations: (1) downtown El Paso, (2) the old Magoffin Homestead, (3) the city library, or (4) the College of Mines. The downtown merchants petitioned to place the museum within

the town's central business district. Others campaigned to purchase the old Magoffin Home and adjoining property. One faction favored adding a wing to the public library to accommodate a museum. Some advocated to place the museum on city property adjacent to the College of Mines. The mayor and county judge cautioned that the town and county lacked funds to maintain and operate a museum.[11]

The controversy was so intense that the chamber had to disband its quarrelling committee. On December 19, 1935, the issue was settled when the county advisory board voted 6-5 to locate the museum on ten acres adjacent to the College of Mines (University of Texas at El Paso). In response, an *El Paso Times* editorial asserted that it was time to put bad feelings aside:

> Now let the irritation die out, the rancor be forgotten. And especially let no one hold resentment against the College of Mines. The college itself had nothing to do with this squabble, was a silent bystander throughout, and should not be unjustly penalized by the withdrawal of one iota of public favor or support.[12]

In addition, the state funded the construction of the Socorro Mission diorama that was exhibited at the Dallas exposition. El Paso's three performing groups at the exposition were funded by private contributions. They included the Tigua Indian dancers, the Tipica Orchestra, and the Texas Chorus. The city of El Paso intended to subsidize participation of the orchestra and chorus with an allocation of $500, but it was determined, when they were about to depart for Dallas, that the funding ordinance violated the city charter. On June 9, 1936, the chamber of commerce hastily sent one thousand solicitation letters requesting donations of one dollar each to support El Paso's participation at the Texas Centennial Exposition.

The El Paso Public Schools coordinated and sponsored the largest school centennial program in Texas. It was to be a five-day historical pageant that dramatized regional history. It involved more than 30,000 school children.

On New Years Day, January 1, 1936, El Paso's Sun Carnival parade launched the state's centennial celebrations. At the time, it was the biggest local event ever held and attracted over 100,000 observers. The parade, in which a large group of Tigua Indians marched, reflected the region's ethnic groups—Asians, Anglos, His-

panics, Black Americans, and Native Americans. The Mescalero Apache tribe's float was entitled "First American." The parade was followed by the Sun Bowl game that involved New Mexico's Aggies against Hardin-Simmons.

Tigua Indians Travel to the Dallas Exposition

On June 10, 1936, thirty-four Tigua Indians traveled by bus to Dallas to celebrate the centennial. Cleoflas Calleros, local historian and social worker, organized the participation of the Tigua Indians at the exposition. The Ford Motor Company may have provided transportation from El Paso to Dallas.[14] A new Ford bus transported the tribal delegation to the exposition. The side panels of the bus were decorated with a portrait of an Indian in headdress and the large letters: "Tigua Indians Ysleta, Texas," The El Paso caravan included the Tigua Indians and the Negro Chorus. They stopped en route in Abilene, San Antonio and small towns to promote El Paso's centennial. They distributed centennial ribbons



Tiguas ready to depart for Austin (photo courtesy of N. Houser)

and other El Paso promotional materials. Cleofas Calleros described the trip:

> The Ysleta Indians, 34 in number and in my charge, accompanied by Assistants Angel H. Valenzuela, Jr., and Eduardo Ordonez, left Ysleta at 3 p.m. June 10. The El Paso Pioneer Negro Chorus, in charge of Mr. Leslie Reed, left El Paso at 2 p.m. June 10. Both groups traveled together in a new V-8 Ford bus and two private cars. We reached Dallas at 7 p.m. June 11.[15]

The Texas Centennial Exposition opened in Dallas on Saturday, June 6, 1936 and closed on Sunday, November 29th. The Tigua tribal delegation participated in a three-day program, June 12th to 14th, at the exposition. The Texas Centennial celebrated El Paso Day on June 12th. Jack Chaney and Dorrance Roderick served respectively as the general chairman and program chairman for that event.

At 9:30 a.m., the Negro Chorus and the Tigua Indians entered the arena grounds.[17] The centennial coordinators were unaware that they were on the agenda. It was mistakenly announced that the Alabama Indians were to make a special presentation to the president. The Tigua were probably misidentified as Alabama-Coushatta Indians from east Texas.

On June 12, when the Texas Centennial Exposition celebrated El Paso Day, it was also called "The Presidents Day." President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered a thirty-minute speech at the Cotton Bowl Stadium. Apparently El Paso officials had poorly coordinated the community's presence at this event. The city council had approved the purchase of a $60 dollar Mexican sombrero to be presented to President Roosevelt, but the presentation was not made.[16] Although the group was well stocked with promotional materials, only a few El Paso centennial promotional badges and ribbons were distributed at the exposition.

Most visiting El Pasoans, including members of the Tipica Orchestra and the Texas Chorus, were unaware of the Tigua presentation to President Roosevelt at the Cotton Bowl and therefore were not present at the event. At 9:30 a.m., the Negro Chorus and the Tigua Indians entered the arena grounds.[17] The centen-

nial coordinators were unaware that they were on the agenda. It was mistakenly announced that the Alabama Indians were to make a special presentation to the president. The Tigua were probably misidentified as Alabama-Coushatta Indians from east Texas. Cleofas Calleros recalled that the Tiguas and the Negro Chorus were the only civilians on the arena grounds where hundreds of secret service men, marshals, rangers, soldiers, and marines mingled:

> A few minutes prior to the President's arrival, Mayor Sherman and his wife came in, and I asked the mayor that he and wife join our group after the President's address for the presentation of the Indian program, which they did. At the request of Cacique Damasio Colmenero, I was given the honor of presenting the President with the headdress and naming him Honorary Cacique of the Tigua Indians of Ysleta. The cacique presented the President with a pair of moccasins; squaw Isabel Granillo presented Mr. Roosevelt with an Indian molcajete. Governor Allred presented us to the President and Mrs. Roosevelt. A few minutes prior, the radio announcer announced that Indians from Alabama were to honor the President. This was a mistake of the announcer and could not be corrected in time. Sixty-five thousand spectators looked on.[18]

It was an exceptionally hot day at the Cotton Bowl and several hundred children in the "world's largest choir" suffered from heat stroke.[19] Later that day, the El Paso delegations, comprised of the Tigua Dancers, the Texas Chorus, the Negro Chorus, and the Tipica Orchestra performed at the amphitheater. Mayor Sherman, Mr. Harwell, and Mr. Calleros addressed the audience about El Paso's rich history.

On June 14, the Tigua dancers opened the National Folk Festival, an event that celebrated the state's cultural diversity.[20] The evening program included a performance at the Gulf Petroleum Building with the Tigua and the Tipica Orchestra that was broadcast nationally on the radio.[21]

In 1935, many articles appeared in the media promoting El Paso's contributions to the Texas Centennial. Every Sunday from February to April, KTSM radio station aired a dramatic series entitled "The Builders of El Paso." Radio actors portrayed major

historical figures—Cabeza de Vaca, Simeon Hart, James Wiley Magoffin, Solomon Schutz and others. The characters reflected the area's multicultural heritage. This material is now in Special Collections at the University of Texas at El Paso. A local publisher produced a regional travel guide in an attractive magazine format that celebrated the state centennial.[22]

In the summer of 1935, the *El Paso Herald-Post* had proclaimed that El Paso's missions had been neglected. The members of the Chamber of Commerce were convinced that the historic missions, if properly promoted, would benefit tourism as had been realized in California by popularizing the Pacific coast missions. The El Paso missions were vigorously promoted, but money was lacking for essential investment to restore historic edifices and for major enhancements to the tourism infrastructure. This centennial effort established a foundation for future mission promotion and restoration projects.

On August 24, 1935, an editorial entitled "Capitalizing on Missions" suggested that El Paso's centenary should highlight the missions:

> . . . the ancient missions at Ysleta, Socorro, San Elizario; the town of Ysleta, recognizably the oldest European settlement in Texas: the oldest farm in continuous cultivation in the United States. . . . . capitalizing on our missions ought to be one of the principal phases of El Paso's Centennial participation has met with quick response and approval from both church and centennial circles.[23]

Wallace Perry, El Paso's centennial commission representative, was a strong advocate of the area missions. In 1935, he had attempted to acquire funding to promote the missions: "...it seems to me that, either with Centennial funds if we can get a large enough allocation or with part Centennial funds and part federal work relief, we ought to be able to dress up both missions and grounds for the Centennial-year visitors."[24]

A small-scale replica of the Socorro Mission was exhibited at the fair.[25] It was reported that relics from the Ysleta and Socorro missions would be displayed at the fair, including what was purported to be an ancient ivory crucifix from the Socorro Mission.

Father Gerard Decorme, historian and resident priest at Ysleta Mission, was commissioned by Bishop A.J. Schuler to write

a history of the lower valley mission. His studies contributed to the history of the Tigua and the neighboring tribes of the region. During the next three decades, the interest created by the centennial would generate research and publications.

NICHOLAS P. HOUSER has advanced degrees in anthropology, history, and public health. As archivist for Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, he conducts research on the Ysleta Grant and the history of the El Paso region. He has created exhibits for museums and cultural centers, including the Tigua Indian Cultural Center, El Paso Mission Trail Association and the Los Portales Visitors Center in San Elizario, etc. He has worked with Native American communities in the American Southwest and Latin America. He has published books and articles and prepared script for video documentaries. He is project historian and co-fundraiser for the XII Travelers Memorial of the Southwest and also a volunteer to several Native American communities in northern Mexico. Mr. Houser resides in El Paso with his wife Norma, and two children, Maria and Perry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. H.G. Bosong was an early El Paso photographer; *El Paso Herald,* May 14, 1890; *El Paso Times,* Dec. 24, 1923.
2. *El Paso Herald Post,* Sept. 10, 1899.
3. Not since the 1901 Ysleta visit by ethnologist Dr. Fewkes, had El Pasoans been cognizant of the tribe's existence and historical contributions. Fewkes, J.W. 1902, "The Pueblo Settlements Near El Paso," *American Anthropologist,* n.s. 4(1):57-75, (New York, 1902), G.P. Putnam's Sons. Fewkes, J.W., "Diary of J. Walter Fewkes," in Ysleta del Sur Archives, Edited by Tom Diamond, Vol. 3, 189-305 (El Paso, 2000). *El Paso Herald,* Nov. 5, 1901.
4. *El Paso Herald-Post,* Aug. 21, 1935.
5. *El Paso Herald-Post,* April 2,1935; Aug. 18, 1935; Ragsdale, Kenneth B., *The Year America Discovered Texas, Centennial '39,* No. 23, The Centennial Series, Texas A&M University (Dallas, 1987), 75.
6. Ragsdale, 75.
7. *El Paso Times,* Oct. 12, 1935.
8. *El Paso Herald-Post,* Oct. 19, 1935.
9. *El Paso Herald-Post,* Jan. 1, 1935. *El Paso Herald-Post,* May 27, 1936.
10. *El Paso Times,* Oct. 20, 1935.
11. *El Paso Times,* Dec. 10, 1935.
12. *El Paso Times,* Dec. 19, 1935.

13. *El Paso Herald-Post,* Jan. 25, 1936; *El Paso Times,* May 30, 1936; *Texas Centennial Review,* March 18, April 22, 1936.

14. Henry Ford made a personal tour of Texas to celebrate the centennial that included black gospel singers and other entertainers (Texas State Library and Archives, Texas Centennial Records; University of Texas, Arlington, Special Collections Division).

15. *El Paso Times,* June 24, 1936.

16. *El Paso Times,* June 24, 1936.

17. El Paso Day was celebrated the day before the tribe's annual feast day of San Antonio, which was observed in Ysleta minus the tribal drum, cacique and thirty-four tribal members. The first activity of the day was President Roosevelt's Cotton Bowl speech.

18. *El Paso Times,* June 24, 1936.

19. Ragsdale 1987.

20. The Tigua performed traditional dances such as "El Primer Bail," "Los Joguenes," "La Figura," and "El Sharo," The local newspaper reported that the tribe retained their ancient government. One article described their dress as follows: "The men dancers wear red uniforms with yellow trimmings and the women wear black and white costumes with multi-colored ribbons" (*El Paso Herald-Post,* June 10, 1936).

21. *El Paso Times,* June 24, 1936.

22. Beedle, C.L.; C.L. Trigg; A.B. Purceli; Ferne D. Hedgecork, editors. *Picturesque Southwest, Traveler's Guide to Southwestern Attractions,* Circulation Offices, El Paso, Texas. 1937. [research note: This is the first comprehensive travel publication that focused on the El Paso area.]

23. *El Paso Herald-Post,* August 24, 1935.

24. *El Paso Herald-Post,* August 21, 1935.

25. *Western Americana,* July 11, 1936.

