

ANOTHER CIVIL-RIGHTS HEADACHE — PLIGHT OF MEXICAN- AMERICANS

Negroes are not the only minority complaining of discrimination. Mexican-Americans are growing restive, too.

Los Angeles, as a result, now faces danger on two fronts.

Big fear is a clash between Negroes and Mexican-Americans.



LOS ANGELES

This city, once again, is in terror of racial rioters.

Negro violence began erupting anew in mid-May. As Memorial Day neared, one outburst followed another. Racial tension grew.

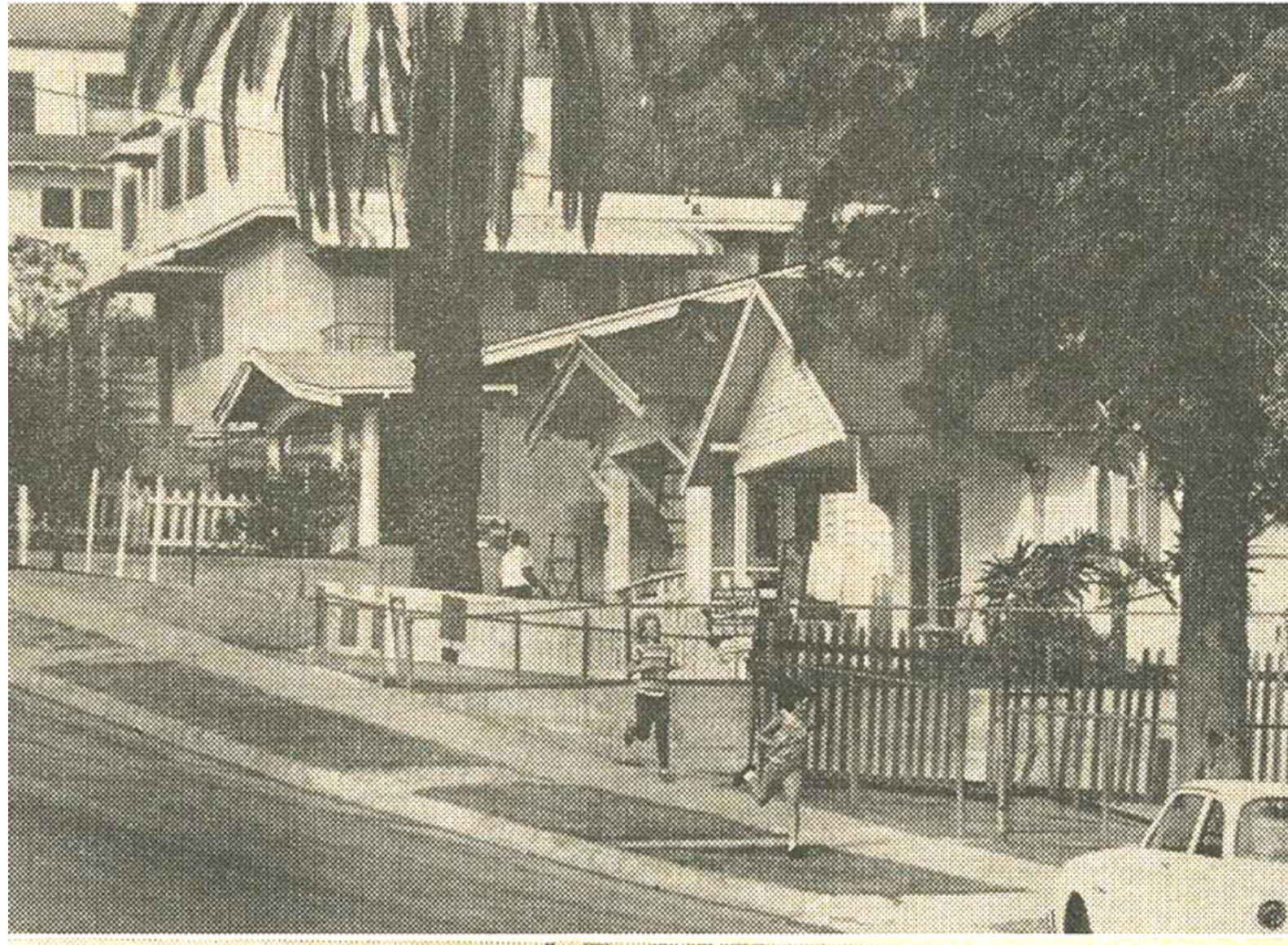
Another massive riot such as that which rocked this city's Negro section of Watts in 1965 was feared to be in the making.

Behind this immediate danger, a new danger is now seen developing. The new danger is of trouble involving the city's big population of Mexican-Americans and others of Latin-American descent.

Rivalry is mounting. What many people close to the situation fear is a clash between Negroes and Mexican-Americans—two minorities that are becoming bitter rivals.

President Lyndon Johnson, on May 21, took note of both dangers. He told a news conference that: "We are very concerned with the problems in Watts," and he also said: "We have been concerned about the special problem of Mexican-Americans and other Spanish-speaking people in our country."

Mexican-Americans

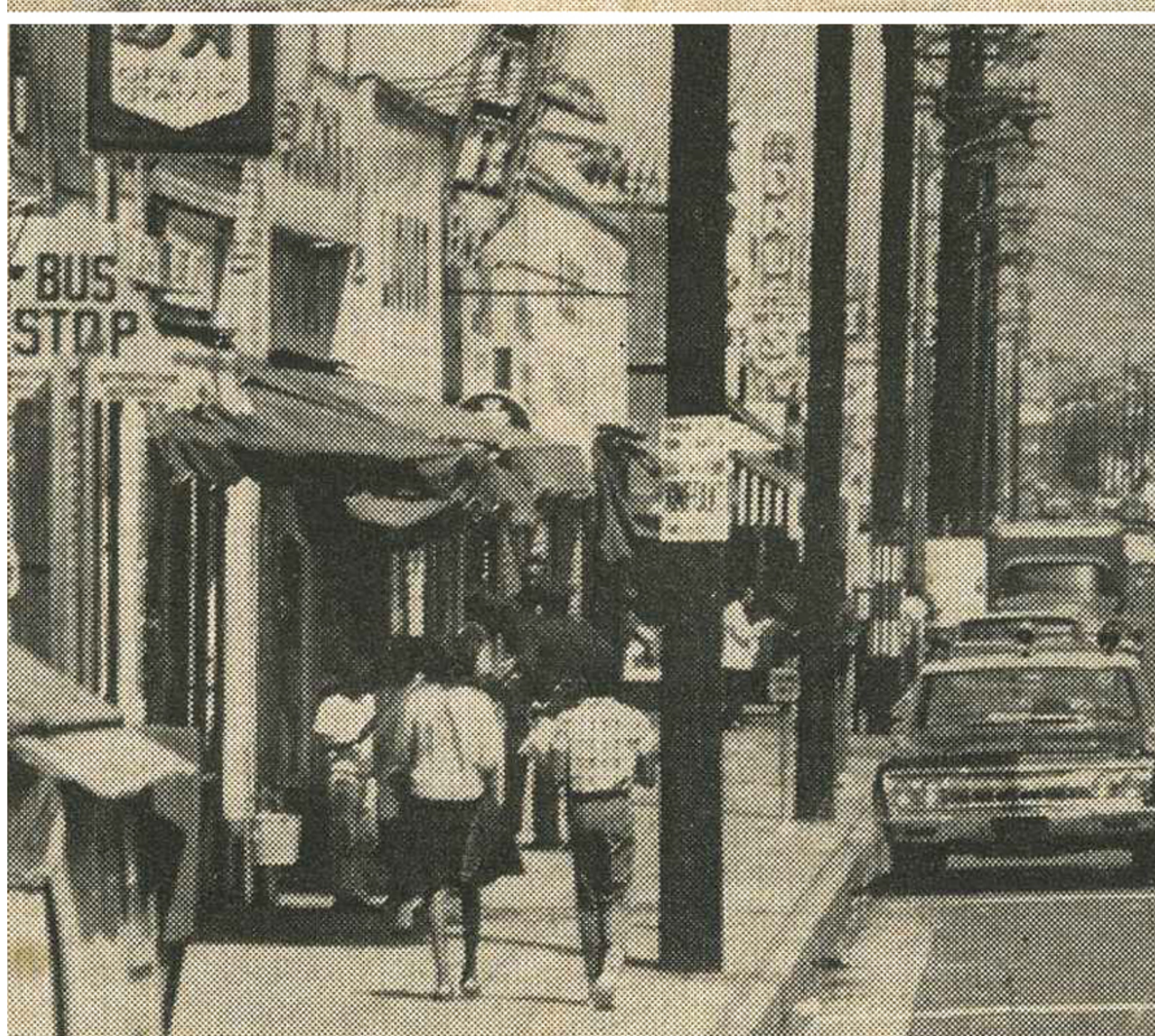


EAST LOS ANGELES, where most Mexican-Americans live, has wide streets and parks and predominantly single-family dwellings.

On May 26, leaders of four Mexican-American groups in the Southwest were invited to the White House to discuss Mexican-American problems with the President's staff. A White House conference had already been scheduled to open June 1 to discuss Negro problems.

Los Angeles has more of both problems than most cities.

In the metropolitan area of Los Angeles County, there are estimated to be about 664,000 Latin Americans and about 531,000 Negroes. There may be many more. Together, they make up at least one sixth of the county's total population of 6.9 million.



WATTS AREA, where Negroes live, is no slum. But both areas suffer from inadequate transportation and deteriorating housing.

Mexican-Americans

The squeaking wheel— Both of these minority groups consider themselves to be victims of discrimination. In the past, it has been Negroes who made the loudest protests and turned to violence. Mexican-Americans remained relatively passive.

But now that situation is seen to be changing. Militancy among the Mexican-Americans is reported to be growing.

Mexican-Americans complain that they are neglected while Negroes reap most of the benefits of civil-rights acts and antipoverty programs. Says Juan Avecedo, a social worker:

“There is a feeling that if it takes a Watts riot for the Negroes to get some attention and help, then maybe that’s what the Mexican-Americans should consider.”

That is only part of the new danger.

Some Mexican-American leaders warn that relations between their people and the Negroes are at a “low, low ebb—on the verge of violence.”

Says Ralph Poblano of the Council of Mexican-American Affairs:

“It would be extremely serious if a flare-up should start between Mexican-American and Negro groups. This, I am sorry to say, would undoubtedly dwarf the Watts area riots of last year.”

Now a killing. Already there have been incidents of violence between the groups. In April a Mexican-American was killed in a street fight between gangs of Negro and Mexican-American teenagers. On May 9, Mexican-American youths pulled a Negro man from his stalled car, beat him and shot him in the leg as he fled.

Relations between these two groups have never been close, although they have lived in close proximity for years and shared many of the same problems.

Both groups are on the bottom rungs of the economic and educational ladders. There is competition between them for low-paying jobs—particularly for semiskilled and unskilled work in the construction and garment industries and service trades.

This competition has grown more bitter since the start of the antipoverty program and since Negroes have begun to make gains in civil rights.

Many Mexican-Americans are jealous of Negro progress and are convinced that they are being shortchanged in favor of the Negro.

Goal: equal progress. Leaders among the Mexican-Americans say they do not begrudge the Negro his progress and only want the same for their people. These leaders blame government, labor unions and businesses—accuse them of passing over the Mexican-Americans in favor of Negroes in an effort to build a good “civil-rights image,” and because more attention is being focused on the problems of Negroes.

The average Mexican-American, however, reacts with bitterness when he loses out to a Negro in competition for a job. This bitterness frequently turns into anger toward all Negroes.

Mexican-Americans

Greatest danger of a clash between Negroes and Mexican-Americans is seen in the 300 street gangs that exist in the Los Angeles area. It is these gangs, made up largely of delinquents and to a Mexican-American official who once was a gang member, this attitude is changing. He describes the situation now as "boiling hot," with "tension growing in some quarters."

Police are alert to the dangers. Inspector Daryl Gates, who is in charge of police in the southern area of Los Angeles, says this: "We've had rumbles that there is bad feeling and that there may be trouble between Negroes and Mexican-Americans."

Antipoverty officials deny that any favoritism has been shown to Negroes over Mexican-Americans. They say that of 41.5 million dollars allocated by the local antipoverty board during the first year of the program, 40 per cent went to Negro neighborhoods and 40 per cent to Mexican-American neighborhoods, with the remaining 20 per cent earmarked for projects in other areas.

These officials point to job-training programs, adult-education projects, teenage centers, day-care centers for children and other projects established in Mexican-American areas.

Mexican-American leaders, however, call this aid "a drop in the bucket." They note that of 13 outposts of the Neighborhood Adult Participation Project in the Los Angeles poverty program, only two serve Mexican-American areas.

Wanted: "Marshall Plan." What is needed is a "Marshall Plan" for Mexican-Americans, according to Albert Pena of San Antonio, Tex., president of the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations. He says:

"We need a massive crash program that will meet the peculiar problems of the Mexican-Americans. If you had the same conditions in foreign countries as those that face many Mexican-Americans, they'd be getting foreign aid from the U. S. Government."

Mexican-American leaders say their people have the same problems of unemployment, low income and discrimination that are faced by Negroes—but also have the added handicaps of a higher rate of illiteracy and a culture that is based on Mexican—not U. S.—standards.

One of the biggest problems is that large numbers of the Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles are immigrants from Mexico, and thus unfamiliar with American ways of life. About 20 per cent of the 2 million Californians with Spanish surnames were born in Mexico.

Between 1955 and 1965, about 432,500 Mexicans emigrated to the U. S. legally—and large numbers crossed the border illegally. More than half of all these settled in California.

Many of these new residents cannot speak English, and the children, though born in the U. S., enter school with little or no knowledge of English.

The education gap. A 1964 study disclosed that 18 per cent of Mexican-American men and 22 per cent of Mexican-American women in Los Angeles were "functionally illiterate." This compares with a rate of 9 per cent among Negro men and 4 per cent among Negro women.

The median level of education among Mexican-Americans is 8.6 years of schooling, compared with 10.5 years for Negroes and 12.1 years for "others."



MEXICAN-AMERICANS have a new hero in Cesar Chavez, shown waving to a crowd in Sacramento. Chavez was the leader of a successful strike by vineyard workers.

The school "dropout" rate among the Mexican-Americans is the worst of any group in California.

Although they complain less about it, Mexican-Americans face the same de facto segregation in schools as that faced by Negroes. About 80 per cent of the Mexican-Americans and 93 per cent of the Negroes are concentrated in three of the city's six school districts. Two high schools are predominantly Mexican-American and four are nearly all-Negro.

Many Mexican-Americans blame their poor educational record on teachers who make no attempt to understand a child from a bilingual, bicultural home. Although Mexican-Americans make up 16 per cent of the student enrollment in Los Angeles schools, only 2 per cent of the teachers are Mexican-Americans.

Economically, a Mexican-American in Los Angeles appears, on the surface at least, to be better off than the Negro.

A recent Census Bureau survey showed an unemployment rate of 10 per cent in Negro areas of this city, against a rate of 7.7 per cent in Mexican-American areas.

Median family income, according to this survey, was \$4,735 a year for Negroes and \$5,106 for Mexican-Americans.

Dr. Paul Bullock, research economist at the University of California at Los Angeles, gives this picture:

"Long-term unemployment—lasting at least six months at a time—is a much more serious problem among Negroes than among Mexican-Americans.

"Intermittency or irregularity of employment is a problem for both groups."

Problem of big families. Mexican-American leaders say the effect of unemployment is greater on their people because — predominantly Catholic — they have larger families.

For all their problems, the Mexican-Americans have one advantage over Negroes—their color. Officially classified as Caucasian, they find it easier to be assimilated into the white society and find homes in all sections of the city.

However, Dionicio Morales, executive director of the Economic Opportunities Foundation, says:

"Our society is still color-conscious. In places where a fair-complexioned Mexican-American may be accepted, a darker-skinned one will be turned away."

Most Mexican-Americans here live in what they call "barrios"—their name for what Negroes would call ghettos.

There is little to choose between the Mexican-American "barrios" and the Negro "ghettos" here.

Neither East Los Angeles nor Watts resembles the slums of Eastern cities. Both have wide streets, parks and most-

Mexican-Americans

ly single-family dwelling units. But both suffer from inadequate public transportation and deteriorating housing.

Up to now, few Mexican-Americans have had the will to break out of their "barrios." Says one official from the Mexican-American Council:

"I don't think the average Mexican-American has grasped the concept of civil rights. His attitudes toward government and the democratic processes are entirely different."

Another Mexican-American explains:

"If a Negro tried to buy a house and were turned away because he was a Negro, he would probably go to some civil-rights organization or other agency and complain.

"A Mexican, refused a house, would go home and say, 'I didn't want the house anyway.'"

Starting to fight. That attitude is now changing, however. Led by men who are proud of their heritage, Mexican-Americans are about to take a page from the Negro book—and start fighting for a better life.

Newest hero of the Mexican-Americans is Cesar Chavez, who recently led a successful strike by vineyard workers. To climax the strike, he led a 25-day march to Sacramento, the State capital.

"Chavez has become something of a Martin Luther King to his people," says one official. Says another:

"If Chavez can win success with a march on Sacramento, I propose that we Mexican-Americans organize a march on Washington to call attention to our plight."

All 50 Mexican-American delegates from five Southwestern States recently walked out in protest from a conference of the Federal Equal Employment Opportunities Commission in Albuquerque, N. M. At the conference, they accused the Commission of indifference to their problems and discrimination in its own hiring practices.

Political indifference. Mexican-Americans have never been very politically conscious. Few vote. But this, too, may change soon.

Senator Joseph M. Montoya (Dem.), of New Mexico, told a Mexican-American group in East Los Angeles recently:

"Spanish-speaking Americans, if they will organize, work together and, above all, register and vote, can become one of the most politically potent groups in the United States."

A few leaders talk hopefully of a powerful coalition between Negroes and Mexican-Americans. This, however, is a hope for the future.

Right now, the mood is one of growing bitterness between the two groups. And Los Angeles, already plagued with Negro violence, sees a new kind of racial danger developing.

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