

Acknowledgments

BOOKS ARE USUALLY MADE POSSIBLE BY LOTS OF PASSION and good sources, and for this book I had an ample supply of both. My passion for this story comes from my having grown up in the barrios of the West Side of San Antonio and attending Sidney Lanier High School. Like the basketball players I write about, I spent much of my life across the street from the high school or within a short walking distance. My family bought their food at the H-E-B a block away from our home and half a block from the school, got our hot and tasty Mexican bread across the street on the corner, our tortillas—handmade—a block the other way, and our medicine—and shakes—at the corner pharmacy only about thirty yards from our front door. On the way there, we'd pass the local theater, separated from my family's duplex by an alley. Across the street from the movie house was the restaurant where my father worked. From the big storefront window he could see both our house across the street to the west, and my elementary school—also across the street—to the east. Mine was what President Jimmy Carter once described as an “ethnically pure” neighborhood.

The extended version of that Lanier community was also the fertile ground in which grew those young men who donned the basketball uniform of the Voks on their way to numerous championships. Like me, they became lifelong “Lanierites” and thus natural allies in the writing of this book. I was lucky enough to interview seven former Lanier players, two sons, two spouses, and several die-hard fans. Their recollections of their playing time and of their friends and former teammates provided the foundation for this story.

The first two players I interviewed, and probably the biggest fans of Lanier, were brothers Jesse and Carlos Camacho, who played in the late 1930s and early 1940s. I spent two days in two different years talking about the team,

the players, the school, and 1940s San Antonio with them. Later I followed up the interviews with Jesse in his home and had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing his wife, Jessie, a former member of the pep squad and later a secretary at Lanier. The next player I interviewed was Tony Rivera, two-time all-state player and the hero of the first state championship team. More than any other player, he spoke openly about the hostilities he and his teammates faced from white players and the discrimination in out-of-town gymnasiums.

Those three led me to the one player that proved to be the most helpful and the one I most pestered with questions and engaged in long conversations with: David Rodríguez, all-state player, who played in the two state championship teams and would later go on to coach alongside William Carson “Nemo” Herrera, the legendary coach who guided these young West Side boys to five regional titles, two third-place finishes, one second-place, and two state titles. I interviewed this junior college All-American in his home in El Paso. He was the only player to have a scrapbook handy. We spoke for hours the first time and then spent numerous hours on the phone every time a new question arose and when I simply needed to have someone provide me feedback on a thought I had about the Lanier Voks or the West Side of San Antonio. His scrapbook turned out to be crucial in reconstructing the basketball seasons from 1942 to 1945. I had tried the school to find old school newspapers and yearbooks, but of the former they had none, and it took the school district almost two years to provide me copies of the yearbooks from 1940 to 1945.

I then interviewed Walter Kelley, the “half-gringo” on the 1943 team whom players lovingly called “Rough-House Kelley” because he was all of one hundred pounds but could still play a mean defensive game. He exuded love for Lanier during the interview, and because of him—and his brother, whom I did not interview—Chapter 9 became a discussion of the partly Mexican students at Lanier.

And just when I thought I would not be able to, I got to interview Tony Cardona, the all-state guard/forward, who helped win Lanier’s first regional title and helped me open the book with the story of the riot his last-second shot caused. Other than Jesse and Carlos Camacho, no other player had married a Lanier girl. Rebecca, a tall, sophisticated, and charming woman, gave me insights that none of the other players had even thought about. To my dismay, Tony Cardona and Walter Kelley passed away before I finished the book. They joined team captain and all-around athlete Henry Escobedo, the only player alive at the time that I did not interview (because he was ill), in the basketball courts up in heaven.

The final player to be interviewed was the one who had started it all with an anecdote he gave a research assistant of mine almost twenty years earlier,

when I was working on another book. It was then that I found out that Mexicans could play basketball and that at one time they had dominated Class 1A basketball in Texas. Joe Bernal provided not only memories of his time in high school, but as a veteran civil rights legislator he provided a perspective on race relations, segregation, and growing up Mexican American that few others could. David Rodríguez and he were the ones with the sharpest minds, and they were only in their eighties when interviewed.

Through the players, I contacted Charles Herrera, one of Nemo Herrera's sons, who has a scrapbook kept by his father. It is a large scrapbook that covers Nemo Herrera's sports career, from middle school to the years after he retired from coaching. It has poems, slogans, and picture upon picture of his youth, his players—both football and basketball—and a number of articles and news clippings that covered his life. Charles became a good source and a strong supporter of this project. One other person, Raul Zuniga—himself a basketball player, but after the Nemo era—was helpful in providing perspective on Lanier sports and the community around the school.

Also extremely helpful were some friends who graduated with me twenty-four years after the last state basketball championship. They gave me tidbits about their growing years, the places where the students hung out—I was always too poor to attend most dances and student activities—their lives in the Alazan federal housing projects, the nicknames we used, the teachers and the administrators who watched over us, and so forth. Why was this important? Because many of the players lived in the same housing projects, hung out in some of the same places years before, gave each other nicknames—some similar to the ones we used—and knew teachers who were still there when my cohorts and I arrived at Lanier. This allowed me to tie the 1940s to the 1960s and in some way to connect all Mexicans and Mexican Americans that have ever attended a segregated school and lived in the barrios of the United States.

One former classmate to whom I owe much is Benjamin Dominguez, who became my volunteer research assistant at the start of the project. Ben did the first initial interview with the Camacho brothers and Tony Rivera, along with interviews of other people who lived during that era. His enthusiasm for the project and the occasional document he found kept me enthused about the book.

My research was made possible by funding from the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University through the Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Professorship in Western and Latino History that I currently hold. Friend and colleague—and department chair—Donald J. Harreld provided me a key semester off that allowed me to finish most of my research. Allison Faust, Sponsoring Editor, of the University of Texas Press believed in

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Angela Ashurst-McGee, editor extraordinaire, helped greatly with her editing and her incisive comments on the manuscript. She made it easier to move paragraphs and even ideas around. And, of course, she helped get the manuscript ready for submission, as no matter the books I've written and the years in this business, I'm still all thumbs when it comes to giving the press what it wants.

Finally, my Alejandra made this project happen with her support and her company. While my sweet wife has not been in full health for a number of years, she still accompanied me on several trips and kept me excited by asking good questions about the players, the team, and the school. And she listened attentively—though probably rolled her eyes occasionally—while I discussed the research and reminisced about my old Lanier days.

When Mexicans Could Play Ball

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