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Article Summary: Political and social changes after World War II eventually resulted in more equitable treatment for the Latino community in Nebraska. Although that community's splinter groups argued for years over concepts of identity and strategies for effective action, in 1972 Nebraska became the first state in the nation to establish a statutory agency charged with advocacy on behalf of the Hispanic population.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Robert Navarro, Ralph Grajeda, Sam Franco, Raymond Ramirez, Terry Carpenter, J James Exon, Rudy Peralez, Ramon Perez, B N "Nick" Garcia, Jesus Quijas, Ignacio Valdez, G G Garcia, Eugene Mahoney, Stanley Porras, Eli Cardona

Community-based Organizations / Programs: Scottsbluff Mexican Awareness Week; League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC); American GI Forum; La Raza Unida Party; Service, Employment, Redevelopment (SER) Jobs for Progress; Mexican-American Voters; Chicano Awareness Center; New Congress for Community Development; Nebraska Migrant Action Council; Mexican Awareness Through Association (MATA); Mexican-American Task Force Advisory Council

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Photographs / Images: Mexican boy in Nebraska sugar beet field, photographed by John Vachon, Lincoln County, October 1938; Mexican nationals travelling to harvest US sugar beets, 1943; Reverend Robert Navarro, pastor of Gethsemane Lutheran Church of Omaha, supporter of state advocacy commission on behalf of Nebraska's Mexican Americans; Rudy Peralez, head of state Technical Assistance Agency under Governor Exon, director of the Panhandle Community Action Agency; Ray Ramirez with Stella Martinez (Ramirez served on the initial Mexican-American advisory commission and on the statutory commission); Jesse Cervantes, Scottsbluff Chicano leader, executive director of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission; inset page of the Spanish-language version of the Nebraska Drivers' Manual; American Indian Movement representatives meeting with Chicano leaders to address problems faced by minorities in the Nebraska Panhandle in Scottsbluff, January 1973 (Vernon Bellecourt, Ramon Perez, Mrs Arturo Lerma, John Two Birds Arbuckle, Leroy Casados); Stanley Porras, first executive

director of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission, with Fernando E D DeBaca, presidential assistant, in Washington, DC

*The Early Years of the
Nebraska Commission on
Mexican-Americans,
1971-1975*



“Service not Power”

BY ROGER P. DAVIS

IN MARCH 1972 NEBRASKA BECAME the first state to establish a statutory agency specifically charged with advocacy on behalf of the Hispanic population. Because most Nebraska Hispanics were of Mexican derivation, the agency was named the Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans (popularly known as the Mexican American Commission).

At that time the Mexican American population of Nebraska was estimated at just fewer than thirty thousand, concentrated in the sugar beet region of the Panhandle and in the eastern Nebraska railroad and meatpacking centers. North Platte, Kearney, and Grand Island also reported significant numbers of Mexican Americans.¹

To those who associated Mexican Americans with the Southwest and California, the presence of this Nebraska community could come as a surprise. In late October 1971, when George McGovern campaign worker Nate Shavira arrived in Scottsbluff, his first observation was, “I was unaware that there was a Chicano population in Nebraska.”²





Due to wartime labor shortages, Mexican nationals were recruited in 1943 to harvest sugar beets under contract with the Inter-mountain Agricultural Improvement Association. Some were sent to Nebraska. Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, LC-USW33-034868-6

Had Shavira been in Scottsbluff just six weeks earlier he would have encountered ample evidence of that population during a citywide Mexican Awareness Week. The festivities included a parade, a picnic, a dance, films, a ballet folklorico, displays at the local library, and a concluding fiesta at the Guadalupe Community Center. He would also have had the opportunity to hear local leaders clarifying that, while many outside of Nebraska might be unaware of the state's Mexican American community, the community itself was very aware of the changes and challenges stirring Hispanic communities across the nation. One local organizer defined the value of the week-long observance in sweeping terms: "What makes it even more important is the application it will make to press our needs in the areas of education, culture, awareness, self-identity, leadership, political involvement, community development and local, state, and federal programming."³ Echoing that sentiment keynote speaker G. G. Garcia, associate director of the President's Cabinet Committee on Opportunities for the Spanish Speaking, declared that current national trends were clearly reflected in the Nebraska community.⁴

Those trends were a series of significant changes since World War II that were transforming the Hispanic, and particularly the Mexican American, community. Before the war, Mexican Americans were primarily located in the border states of the Southwest and in California. The prevailing attitude of the Mexican American communities was one of self-help and assimilation into the predominantly Anglo melting pot. The most visible representation of that view was the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929. A middle-class organization of professionals and civic leaders, LULAC promoted the duties and responsibilities of citizenship, self-improvement, and education. In an era of formal segregation and racism, LULAC insisted that Mexican Americans be recognized as white and, therefore, not legally subject to discrimination. World War II would bring significant changes and challenges to this perspective.⁵

After the war the Mexican American population grew dramatically and began a significant migration into other areas of the nation. The Midwest and Great Plains states saw their Spanish-speaking populations double. While the numbers for Nebraska remained modest, the Mexican American population increased from 1,800 to more than 28,000. More significant than the demographic change was what one source described as a change in attitude.⁶

Scholars agree that Mexican American experiences in the war proved a watershed that fundamentally challenged both the Anglo community at large and the Hispanic community in particular. As expressed by Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann in their study of Spanish-speakers in the United States, "The returning veterans found a country that in some respects differed considerably from the one they had left." For the first time, the veterans received preference over nonveterans in the purchase of automobiles and new homes, and in civil service appointments. Although the gains made by the returning veterans should not be exaggerated, the war and its aftermath "improved to some point the Hispanics' overall position within the United States with far-reaching consequences for the future."⁷

Juan Gonzalez in *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* captures both the change of attitude and a more critical sense of consequence:

It [the war] transformed the thinking of a whole generation of Mexican American men who served in it . . . the Mexican American

Page 67: A young Mexican boy in a Lincoln County, Nebraska, sugar beet field was photographed by John Vachon in October 1938. Mexicans began working in the beet fields of western Nebraska about 1914. By 1920 some 13,000 Mexicans or Mexican-Americans were so employed. Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, LC-USF34-008764-D

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veterans returned home to much of the same discrimination and racism they had left behind, only this time they refused to accept it.⁸

One result was the founding of the American G.I. Forum in Texas in 1948. When a Texas cemetery refused to accept the body of a Mexican American war hero, local veterans protested, ultimately overseeing the burial in Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C. During the next two years the G.I. Forum expanded to more than one hundred chapters in more than twenty states and promoted nonpartisan political and social reform.⁹

Soon other issues and organizations emerged. A new generation of veterans began returning from Vietnam, sharing the same change of attitude as their fathers. More radical and often younger Mexican Americans adopted the identity of "Chicano" and, within the currents of the civil rights and anti-war movements, challenged the status quo in terms of labor rights, land ownership, and political power. They demanded that government pay attention to Mexican American needs and open opportunities for Mexican American leadership. The decades of the 1960s and early 1970s became a period of Mexican American activism.

This activism included the organization of migrant workers in California by Cesar Chavez, occupation of federal properties in New Mexico, and political activism in Texas.

In Colorado, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales founded the Crusade for Justice, a community-based effort to address social, economic, and political issues of the Mexican American community. Gonzalez envisioned a national Chicano political movement and by 1970, he established the La Raza Unida Party in Colorado.¹⁰

While not at the center of these currents of change, Nebraska shared in and reflected the national trends. In his important study of Mexican American communities in the Midwest, Dionicio Nodín Valdés notes:

In the 1970s, Chicanos in the Southwest who even considered the subject thought that the movement in the Midwest was derivative, lagged behind the Southwest chronologically, and accomplished very little. Some even asserted that Midwestern Chicanos were "culturally deprived" or "don't know what it means to be a Chicano. . . ." A closer examination . . . indicates that . . . like their counterparts elsewhere during the period, Midwestern Chicanos engaged in unprecedented political, social, and cultural activism.¹¹

Mary Lyons-Barrett's article, "Chicanos in Nebraska, 1940s Through the 1970s," provides the best review of this development in Nebraska. Chapters of the American G.I. Forum were established in Lincoln in 1949, Omaha in 1957, and Scottsbluff in 1962. By the mid-1960s the Omaha chapter was housing and supervising the federally funded SER (Service, Employment, Redevelopment): Jobs for Progress program. LULAC and the G.I. Forum created SER in 1965 as a non-profit jobs training, counseling, and placement program directed toward the Hispanic community. In purely political terms, the 1960 presidential election prompted the formation of the Mexican American Voters of Omaha and the creation of Viva Kennedy and Viva Johnson clubs in Omaha and Lincoln. By 1970 this initial social, economic, and political activism led to other developments.¹²

In early January 1971 fifteen Mexican American community leaders gathered in Lincoln to form the Mexican-American Task Force Advisory Council. The council was chaired by the Reverend Robert Navarro, pastor of the Gethsemane American Lutheran Church in Omaha, who was born and educated in Mexico. The council adopted recommendations designed to "improve the education of Mexican Americans and public understanding of their way of life." Directing their recommendations to Joseph Soshnik, president of the University of Nebraska, the council asked the university to assist in developing "cultural awareness centers" around the state. Soshnik pledged a careful review and the university helped facilitate the establishment of Chicano cultural centers through the UNL Teachers College Triple T program ("Trainers of Teacher Trainers").¹³

In August 1971 the Omaha Chicano Awareness Center opened its doors. Board members included Navarro, Don Marquez of the Nebraska Equal Opportunity Commission (NEOC), and UNL professor Ralph Grajeda. The Scottsbluff Center opened in October, thanks to the work of Sam Franco, local businessman and NEOC member. A Grand Island center was delayed until the following spring, but finally opened in June 1972 under the leadership of Ray Ramirez, a developmental specialist from the Platte Valley Community Action Agency.¹⁴

In the wake of these developments, student organizations soon appeared across the state. They included the Chicano Association of United Students for Action (La CAUSA) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha; the Mexican American Students Association (MASA) at UNL; and the



The Reverend Robert Navarro, pastor of the Gethsemane Lutheran Church of Omaha, was a leading supporter of a state advocacy commission on behalf of Nebraska's Mexican Americans. Used by permission, Omaha World-Herald

"We see the importance of identifying with people

United Mexican American Students (UMAS) at Chadron State College. Hispanic students at Scottsbluff's Nebraska Western College founded Aztlan (Chicano Students Organization).¹⁵

Explaining the impulse behind this activity, Reverend Navarro blended the traditional goals of assimilation with the rising Chicano movement: "We see the importance of identifying with people who have been left outside of the melting pot. We hope to get in. We are becoming more of a political animal. More of a fighter. More interested in our past." He specifically noted the tide of activism sweeping the grape fields in California, and emphasized that Nebraska Hispanics were fully aware of events occurring elsewhere: "We are more mobile. People are returning to Nebraska with the Chicano feelings of the Southwest. And they see on television the demonstrations and the cry for equalities. They have been affected." He expressed hope that the Task Force Advisory Council could capture and direct the new activism "before it becomes a destructive force."¹⁶

The September 1971 Scottsbluff Mexican Awareness Week proved to be a faithful representation of Navarro's observations regarding the new and the traditional. The celebration began with the first "Chicano Awareness Day," organized by a local community action agency, the New Congress for Community Development, headed by Ramon Perez. Corky Gonzalez was the first weekend's invited keynote speaker. When Gonzalez was unable to attend, Arturo Rodriguez, his brother-in-law, presented the message of Chicano activism and the La Raza ("The People") movement. The festivities concluded with the tenth annual Fiesta del Valle dance and banquet sponsored by the Guadalupe Catholic Church, organized by Fr. Max Valdez.¹⁷

Within this context ideas and plans emerged leading to the creation of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission. Although many contributed, the acknowledged "father" is Sam Franco. A navy veteran and long-time Gering resident, Franco embodied the postwar change in attitude. Following his military service, where he had not felt any discrimination, Franco was appalled when he encountered such treatment in Nebraska during his search for housing, within the job environment, and even at a local restaurant. His brother, a university student in Lincoln, reported the noticeable absence of other Hispanic students. Franco concluded that a "plantation mentality" existed in the state. In early 1971 he turned to a friend, Nebraska State Senator Terry

Carpenter, to try and bring about some changes.¹⁸

"Terrible Terry" Carpenter was a strong-willed and effective state senator from Scottsbluff, who would serve twenty-two years in the Unicameral. Franco had rented from Carpenter and had worked in his store. When Franco brought his concerns to Carpenter, the senator did something very typical of his character. Grabbing a handful of official stationery, Carpenter signed them all and indicated that Sam could fill in the text. In the following weeks numerous state agencies received official requests from Senator Carpenter's office for information they might have regarding their Mexican American constituents.¹⁹

The unusual series of inquiries from the senator's office caught the attention of the state's new governor, J. James Exon. A successful businessman and army veteran, Exon captured the statehouse in the fall 1970 election. He was a friend of Rudy Peralez, head of the Panhandle Community Action Agency, a former Vietnam helicopter pilot who had remained in the National Guard. Exon named Peralez to the state Technical Assistance Agency and later appointed him state director of aeronautics. Peralez and Franco knew each other and when Exon campaigned in the area, Franco would often drive him around. As he worked his way through his first year in office it became clear that Exon was attuned to some of the concerns of the Mexican American community.²⁰

During the first three months of 1971 Mexican American leaders from across the state lobbied the new administration for support for a commission to gather information on and address Mexican American issues. The governor's office proposed creation of an appointed body, the Mexican American Council. The council would comprise six Mexican American citizens, two each from western, central, and eastern Nebraska and three Nebraska state senators, who would serve as legislative advisors. It would be housed administratively within the Technical Assistance Agency.²¹

Sam Franco, Bob Navarro, and Ramon Perez coordinated a counter proposal. Working with Norm Otto, Exon's administrative assistant, Franco and Perez emphasized that their goal was a more substantive commission with legislative authority and they underlined the significance of executive support:

Please be advised that we are not in favor of having this Commission become part of the Technical Assistance Agency. . . .

If the Governor lends his influence to this bill we are certain that the legislature will give



Rudy Peralez headed the state Technical Assistance Agency under Gov. J. James Exon and was former director of the Panhandle Community Action Agency. Nebraska Mexican-American Commission

who have been left outside of the melting pot.”

it more attention. It behooves the Governor to take a position of leadership in pointing out some of the major areas of deficiencies that prevail with the Mexican-American community by submitting this bill to the legislature. In so doing, the burden is placed on the legislature to enact ameliorative legislation. If they should fail to adopt this measure, for whatever reason, then the Governor could, by Executive Order, establish this Commission.²²

The negotiations produced a political compromise. The governor would appoint an advisory commission and one of its first tasks would be to seek legislative support to become an independent state agency. On November 1, 1971, the governor's office announced the creation of a Mexican-American Commission to advise the governor and gather information on the "current problems, conditions, and needs of Mexican-American residents." The six appointees were B. N. "Nick" Garcia (Lincoln), Joseph Juarez (Omaha); Jesus Quijas and Sam Franco (Scottsbluff); and Raymond Ramirez and Ignacio Valdez (Grand Island).²³

Garcia, the newly elected chairman, praised the governor's action:

Thank you for having demonstrated your progressive leadership in appointing the Mexican-American Commission. Your efforts on behalf of the Mexican-American community is noted and will long be remembered. Without a doubt, you will go down in history as a pioneer in bringing the Mexican-Americans into the mainstream of American society.²⁴

Not everyone in the Mexican American community shared this assessment, however. The establishment of the commission generated an immediate controversy that foreshadowed the early years of its existence.

In contrast to the gratitude expressed by the commissioners, other Hispanic leaders sharply criticized the governor and the commission itself. Ramon Perez, director of the Scottsbluff-based New Congress for Community Development, telegraphed the governor that the commission failed to truly represent the Nebraskan Chicano community:

Thanks for the demonstration that elected officials are non-representatives of the poor or the Chicano community. You have shown us mistrust and have again failed to establish communications with persons who want to shape their own destiny and those of their children. I see your latest effort as an expensive puppet show. The figurines have been

carved out by you, the rhetoric and limited action is supplied by someone at the top and the audience is compiled [*sic*] of the poor and Chicano community.²⁵

Ralph Grajeda, coordinator of the Nebraska Chicano Awareness Centers, and Simon Orta, chairman of the UNL President's Commission on Mexican-American Affairs, issued a joint press release equally critical of the governor's work:

Your action of last week in appointing members of the Governor's Mexican American Commission came as no surprise: it is an excellent example of the paternalistic manner in which Chicano people have been treated in this country. We strongly protest your appointments—not because we question the integrity or the abilities of the men you chose—but rather because of the manner in which you made these decisions, almost completely ignoring the will of the Chicano citizens of this state speaking through the Nebraska Coalition of La Raza.²⁶

A lengthy article in the *Scottsbluff Star-Herald* offered some insight to the criticism.²⁷ Perez and others had anticipated that in the selection of the commission, Exon would consult exclusively with the statewide La Raza Coalition, led by Reverend Navarro. The coalition had submitted twelve names to the governor (including Ramon Perez) and declared, "It is the feeling of the Coalition that, with all due respect, these and only these people be appointed."²⁸ The governor selected only two, both Grand Island residents. In filling the remaining four appointments, Exon drew from recommendations by another influential Mexican American organization, the Nebraska branch of the G.I. Forum, headquartered in Omaha. Two were Lincoln and Omaha residents including Garcia, head of the Forum. Although the two remaining appointments were Scottsbluff residents, clearly the nomination process uncovered a division within the Mexican American leadership.²⁹

Perez charged that the governor had failed to live up to commitments made in negotiating the establishment of the commission. Noting that he was one of the initiators of the idea, Perez stated that Exon originally opposed creating the commission due to lack of funding. Perez claimed the La Raza Coalition was responsible for obtaining the governor's support, and that the governor had promised to accept the coalition's nominations. He chastised Exon for appointing "those with a greater degree of maneuverability." Perez encouraged the two Coalition appointees, Ramirez



Ray Ramirez, here with Stella Martinez at the Grand Island Chicano Cultural Center, was appointed by Governor Exon to serve on the initial Mexican-American advisory commission and then as one of the original appointees to the statutory commission created by the legislature in 1972. Used by permission, *Lincoln Journal Star* Archives

and Valdez, to recognize the “tokenism” of their appointments. He also warned them to be vigilant in preventing the commission from being used as an “instrument of oppression against the Chicano community, and a political tool to buy Mexican votes.” Nebraska Chicanos could rely only on the Coalition members on the commission for effective representation, Perez concluded.³⁰

Navarro sounded a more conciliatory note. He acknowledged that Exon never specifically promised that he would appoint only those individuals on the list submitted by the La Raza Coalition.

“I never personally expected him to appoint everybody that we suggested. I am pleased that he chose enough people whose feelings are positive in regards to this commission.”³¹

Franco responded to the criticism by noting that he had shouldered major responsibility for drawing up a bill that would create the commission, while Perez merely signed a letter of support. Regarding the Coalition appointees Franco declared, “If they received the appointments as token, maybe they should resign.” He dismissed Perez’s posturing as “the opinion shared only by Perez and a small minority of a minority that has already been oppressed long enough without being oppressed by our own people.” The Chicano community faced numerous injustices and the way to create change was not through confrontation:

The only way to significantly change the system is to work on the system, to improve it and acknowledge the fact that mistakes exist. Past experience shows that I have the cooperation of those in government and business as well as that we’re making positive strides in our efforts to improve the lot of the Mexican-American.³²

Regionalism and the clash of radical versus traditional political views highlighted the division. Perez envisioned an independent agency of activists with a Panhandle perspective, willing to direct criticism at state authorities. The commission, however, would apparently represent the eastern, reformist, compromising approach outlined by Franco. Each perspective had its supporters within the Mexican American community and challenges to the integrity of the commission’s actions would surface again.

Exon made no apologies for his appointments:

In making the appointments, we took into full consideration the recommendations of the Nebraska Coalition and the G.I. Forum, appointing three members recommended by each group. It’s easy to complain. It’s more difficult to take constructive action.³³

Over the following four months a confluence of Mexican American leaders, Nebraska politicians and bureaucrats, and even a national political representative would set the definition, direction, and purpose of the new commission. The Mexican-American Commission held its first meeting as a governor’s advisory body on December 10–11, 1971, in Lincoln. The meeting addressed organizational structure, an initial agenda of goals, and planning for the upcoming legislative term. The administration emphasized data collection and

research and during a brief inaugural visit, Exon highlighted health, migrant, and education issues.³⁴

Two strong voices insured that political compromise led the agenda. Franco declared that the commission should be an organization with "some drive behind it." He insisted its first goal should be legislation to establish the commission as an arm of the state government. To a reporter Franco stated, "I've seen too many promises made by people but never carried out. I'm not going to be content with that [an advisory commission.]"³⁵

The other distinct presence was G. G. Garcia, who had spoken at the September Mexican American Week in Scottsbluff. Although his visit to Lincoln was brief, his presence was significant. Garcia brought a detailed draft for legislative language to redefine the commission. He led discussion and offered advice on building community support and strategies for gaining approval in the Unicameral.³⁶ Summing up G. G. Garcia's contributions, commission chair B. N. Garcia stated:

We cannot over emphasize the value and quality of the work and experience that Mr. Garcia brought to us. . . . I think it is safe to say that if it was not for Mr. Garcia the Commission would not be as far along as it is now. With his experience and knowledge he helped us move into a more definite direction and gave us confidence to move ahead.³⁷

The commission decided to invite Senator Carpenter to introduce its legislative proposal in the coming session. It also endorsed creation of a temporary liaison with the legislature and state agencies, and offered the position to La Raza Coalition leader Navarro. Governor Exon approved the appointment the following month.³⁸

After the December commission meeting the governor held a press conference to demonstrate his support for the commission and its goals. He announced that funds would be made available to launch a comprehensive study of the health needs of Nebraska's Mexican Americans. More significantly, in a statement that reflected his understanding of the controversy that greeted its creation, the governor pledged support for legislation to transform the commission from a gubernatorial advisory body into a statutory agency. The commission met in Scottsbluff on December 28, 1971, to discuss preparations for the upcoming legislative proposal.³⁹

Following the early December meeting, Chairman Garcia made a special effort to inform community leaders of the progress being made.

In letters to Perez and Ralph Grajeda he invited their cooperation and support. To Perez, he emphasized the statutory issue: "It was the general feeling of the Commissioners that this Commission should not expire—or rather be at the mercy of an Executive Order, the good intentions of one man." To Grajeda, the chairman stated, "As I see it the Commission is united in its work. In order to obtain (our) objectives, we must make every effort to bring our community together."⁴⁰



Scottsbluff Chicano leader Jesse Cervantes was critical of Governor Exon's appointments to the 1971 Mexican-American advisory commission. In 1980 Cervantes became executive director of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission.

Despite Garcia's words and hopes, controversy and community divisions about the commission remained, at least in western Nebraska. Beneath the headline "Chicanos Protest State Commission," the *Scottsbluff Star-Herald* reported that Chicano citizens from the Panhandle met at the La Raza Center in Minatare to complain about the organization's behavior. Perez charged that the commission had failed to inform the public of

***“Nebraska is number one in football.
Let’s make it number one in its efforts
to cure social ills, let’s make it number one
in the peaceful coexistence
of peoples culturally different!”***

their late December meeting in Scottsbluff and was cloaking itself in secrecy and acting like a “spy ring.” Jesse Cervantes criticized Navarro for capitulating to the system and charged that, at the commission meetings, Navarro “said only those things which would please the governor and said nothing that would benefit the low income Chicano people.” Perez criticized the governor for “gross misrepresentation of the Chicano community.” He promised to continue to “struggle against such tyrannical and oppressive acts of government.” The Minatare meeting concluded with an agreement to organize a statewide effort to get local senators to block the creation of the Mexican-American Commission when the bill came up in the legislature.⁴¹

In January 1972 Senators Carpenter and Eugene Mahoney introduced LB 1081 to establish the Mexican-American Commission as a statutory body. In testimony before the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee on January 20, support for the bill came from Carpenter and Mahoney, from John Sullivan of the governor’s office, from Rudy Peralez representing the Technical Assistance Agency, from Senator Ernie Chambers, and from Bob Navarro, representing the commission. No one spoke in opposition.⁴²

Senator Chambers called the bill “an attempt to rectify injustice,” and said the commission would “encourage minorities to face government, not in a confrontation, but as representatives who might be willing to listen to them.” Countering a suggestion from a committee member for a single commission for all minorities, Chambers emphasized the distinct nature of the various communities: different groups “don’t want to put all their eggs in one common basket.”⁴³

Navarro testified that an estimated thirty thousand Nebraskans claimed Hispanic heritage. In addition, thousands of “New Settlers” migrated through the state as agricultural laborers. While these immigrants normally returned to Mexico or followed the work to other regions, “many are forced to consider permanent residence in the communities where they worked” as a result of increasing mechanization. As the new immigrants

struggled to adjust, their needs for health care, education, housing, and employment, along with those of resident Nebraska citizens of Hispanic descent, challenged the state’s social services.⁴⁴ Navarro defined the most pressing problem as the growing development of cultural and ethnic “negativism” within the Mexican American community:

In the process of “Americanizing” the Mexican immigrant, a low self-image is an ill effect. . . . Low self-image produces shame about our past, our elders, our heritage. Low self-image produces few hard driving citizens, few responsible tax-payers, social isolationism. We do not want our brothers and sisters to be that kind of Nebraskans!⁴⁵

Finally, in true appreciation of his audience, Navarro explained the essence of the challenge in ringing terms:

Nebraska is number one in football. Let’s make it number one in its efforts to cure social ills, let’s make it number one in the peaceful coexistence of peoples culturally different!⁴⁶

While the legislative process moved forward, the commission experienced one more formative moment. At the January 29, 1972, meeting the commissioners discussed whether to seek affiliation with a state department or agency rather than stand alone as an independent commission. Scottsbluff Commissioner Jessie Quijas championed affiliation with the governor’s office and the motion carried. Nevertheless, when the issue was considered again at the February meeting, the commission changed its position and went on record in favor of being a separate governmental entity, displaying once again the distinctive role of Commissioner Sam Franco. While Quijas maintained his support for affiliation with the governor’s office, reminding the group to “remember who created us,” Franco argued a different path based on political realities: “[T]he only way for us to do anything is to go out and make some waves. By its very nature, the body is going to create flak and any governor will find it expedient not to get involved.”⁴⁷

LB 1081 passed the legislature with a unanimous vote on March 8 and Exon signed it into law on March 10, 1972. The legislation defined the structure and obligations of the new, independent, Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans. The commission consisted of nine members appointed by the governor, serving staggered three-year terms. The governor or his designee was a member, ex-officio, with the power to vote.

The commission was obligated to meet quarterly, and was specifically charged with several responsibilities: 1) Gather and disseminate information and conduct hearings, conferences, and special studies on problems and programs concerning Mexican Americans; 2) Coordinate, assist, and cooperate with the efforts of state departments and agencies to serve the needs of Mexican Americans, especially in the fields of education, employment, health, housing, welfare, and recreation; 3) Develop, coordinate, and assist other public and private organizations which serve Mexican Americans; 4) Propose new programs concerning Mexican Americans; 5) Evaluate existing programs and proposed legislation concerning Mexican Americans; 6) Stimulate public awareness of the problems of Mexican Americans by conducting a program of public education and encourage the governor and the legislature to develop programs to deal with these problems; and 7) Conduct training programs for community leadership and service project staff.⁴⁸

On May 16, 1972, Exon announced appointment of the nine commissioners. Continuing from the advisory body were Nick Garcia of Lincoln, Joseph Juarez of Omaha, Jesse Quijas of Scottsbluff, and Raymond Ramirez and Ignacio Valdez of Grand Island. New appointees were Raul Mayagoitia of North Platte, Simon Orta of Lincoln, Mrs. Rachel Rodriguez of Scottsbluff, and Fr. Max E. Valdez of Scottsbluff.⁴⁹

Noticeably absent was Sam Franco. On March 23 Franco had submitted his resignation to the governor. As an initial voice and active member of the advisory commission, Franco's explanation for his departure is insightful:

Early in December at the first official meeting of the commission I indicated to my fellow commission members that once LB 1081 was enacted I would submit my resignation. I do so with the understanding and appreciation that one's own effectiveness is diminished by his own longevity.

You can well imagine some of the struggles that I have encountered with the community in pursuit of this legislation. Many of my ideas and desires have been incorporated into the statute. My only other contribution at this time would be in giving added direction to the staff and commission. I respect the judgment of the present commissioners and am confident that they will be able to provide the leadership that is so essential in fulfilling the intent of LB 1081.⁵⁰

For Franco the challenge to success came from

the very community he believed he was serving, and specifically from Scottsbluff. Other voices and personalities claimed that representation and ironically, when the La Raza Coalition protested the initial naming of commissioners, Navarro explained to the governor that the only member with whom they were dissatisfied was Franco. "We base our opposition on his previous history of not representing the Mexican-American people of the Scottsbluff area."⁵¹ The critical juxtaposition of community and representation and the definitions of each would become a constant dynamic challenging the new commission's work.

LB 1081 also provided for the appointment of an executive director. The commission continued the practice of selecting one of their number as chairman, but for formal communications with state agencies, the legislature, and the governor the director would be the commission's voice. To the public and the Mexican American community, the director would become the commission's visible presence. The director would set the agenda and receive praise or condemnation for the commission's work.⁵²

On June 28, 1972, the Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans selected Stanley Porras as its first executive director. A Scottsbluff native, Porras had been director of a Neighborhood Youth Corps, a supervisor of the VISTA program in the Panhandle, and chairman of the Scottsbluff G.I. Forum. He would serve as commission director from June 1972 through March 1977. During that period Porras and the commission recorded some moderate accomplishments and generated some significant controversy as they struggled to represent the Mexican American community.⁵³

For the first three months of his term, Porras labored alone without a secretary or even an office. From a temporary desk on the twelfth floor of the Capitol he corresponded with state agencies and community leaders, announcing the new commission and inviting them to a get-acquainted luncheon. By the end of September he had secured both an office and a secretary, and began work in earnest.⁵⁴

Initially, much of the director's time was occupied by individual requests for assistance. Those facing job and housing discrimination, immigration problems, and difficulties with the state and local bureaucracies solicited and received support in the form of letters, phone calls, and personal intervention. It was not long before broader social and institutional issues claimed the attention of the commission and its director.⁵⁵

3B-3 Letreros de Reglas

Letreros de este tipo proveen información sobre las leyes de tránsito. Obedezca las instrucciones.

Un círculo con una raya diagonal indica NO -- el símbolo indica lo que está prohibido.



- ♦ **Alto** – Párase completamente antes de entrar al cruce. Si hay una raya pintada en el pavimento, párase en la raya. Párase antes de entrar al cruce de peatones, no importa si está delineado o no. Si no hay cruce de peatones, párese en el lugar más seguro que esté más cerca al cruce de los caminos para poder tener una vista plena del tráfico que viene.



- ♦ **Ceder el Paso** – Baje de velocidad o párese si es necesario para ceder el paso a vehículos.



- ♦ **Limite de Velocidad** – Indica la velocidad máxima legal a que un vehículo puede circular en el camino.



- ♦ **Vuelta a la Izquierda Prohibida** Se prohíbe dar vuelta a la izquierda.



- ♦ **Vuelta a la Derecha Prohibida** Se prohíbe dar vuelta a la derecha.



- ♦ **Vuelta en "U" Prohibida** Se prohíbe dar vuelta en "U".

Support for a Spanish-language version of the Nebraska Drivers' Manual was an early initiative of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission.

Two of these involved the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Nebraska State Patrol. Many Spanish-speaking citizens alerted the commission that they faced hardships trying to get a driver's license. Translated editions of the driver's license examination were not widely available and, in some cases, citizens had been told that the Spanish edition had been discontinued. From Department of Motor Vehicles Director John Sullivan, Porras learned that the Spanish-language examination had been discontinued due to the poor quality of its translation, but a new translation had just been done and would be widely distributed. A greater problem was that the state drivers' manual was printed only in English. Suggesting a Spanish version, Porras received a positive response from Sullivan. By April 1974 the commis-

sion had completed a Spanish-language drivers' manual, which was soon published and distributed.⁵⁶

In a more controversial vein, Porras challenged the Nebraska State Patrol's 5' 10" minimum height requirement for admission into the ranks as being discriminatory to Hispanics, whose average height was 5' 6". Porras noted that the FBI used the lesser stature as its minimum, and suggested that research had demonstrated that it would be best to eliminate any height requirement. Maj. E. P. Schroeder, general administrative officer of the State Patrol, explained that the height requirement was essential because, "a policeman by his size and physical appearance influences public opinion."⁵⁷ Schroeder told Porras that revision of the height requirement would remain a "mute [*sic*] question." Senator Terry Carpenter took exception and blasted the Patrol for not actively recruiting "prospective new officers from Nebraska blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Indians." Porras also lobbied the governor for support. The governor's office ordered a compromise, requiring the State Patrol to lower the minimum height to 5' 8".⁵⁸ Although not all that the commission wanted, the new regulation indicated that the Mexican-American Commission had support and was to be taken seriously.

Two other topics would capture the attention of the commission and its director: migrant workers and education. Jobs and health care were pressing issues for migrant families. Porras placed a high priority on addressing the needs of migrant families in western Nebraska and worked hard to attract the Jobs for Progress program to the state. It was the only national job-training program geared for Spanish-speaking people. Through its SER project (Service, Employment, Redevelopment) Hispanic workers received education and training to make them more employable.⁵⁹ SER had been active in Omaha, and Porras now lobbied the governor's office for matching funds required to bring the project to the Scottsbluff area. The Exon administration encouraged the effort and meetings with SER officials, who visited Scottsbluff, showed promise by the summer of 1973. Unfortunately, by year's end, the governor's office reported that anticipated matching federal manpower funds had not materialized and the project ended.⁶⁰

Porras had greater success in his efforts to make the commission itself an active agency for migrant labor in western Nebraska. In March 1973 the commission helped incorporate the Nebraska Migrant Action Council to provide information and

direct services to the migrant population in the Panhandle. The commission and council jointly published a migrant service directory, held a conference in Scottsbluff on migrant issues, and sought long term funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity. Porras was also successful in securing a \$10,000 Emergency Food and Medical Services grant to administer through the local migrant health program.⁶¹

In the area of public education the commission played a major role in a controversy that surfaced in Lyman, Nebraska, a small community west of Scottsbluff. Following reports of an unusually high dropout rate for Mexican Americans and complaints from parents, who criticized the school for harassment and ridicule of Hispanic students, the commission undertook a formal investigation of the Lyman School District. Public meetings were held at the school in November 1973 and May 1974. The commission published and distributed a formal report in October 1974, which concluded that the superintendent and teachers needed sensitizing to the educational and cultural needs of Mexican Americans. The commission recommended five strategies for improvement, including screening of administrators and teachers, hiring of bilingual and bicultural teachers, training programs for teachers and administrators, infusion of bicultural materials into the curriculum, and establishment of a parent-teacher advisory committee to assist the school in cultural awareness. Despite this effort, however, the commission did not escape criticism from segments of the Hispanic community over the investigation's methodology.⁶²

The Mexican-American Commission was also active in less visible ways. Director Porras took a leading role in the establishment of the Nebraska Affirmative Action Committee and its policies, and was one of the committee's first members. He also worked with the University of Nebraska administration to create an affirmative action program, and contributed to the creation of the UNL Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Mexican American Affairs, serving as its chair. The commission was a catalyst for the organization of a self-help program for Mexican Americans in prison. The MATA (Mexican Awareness Through Association) organization offered bilingual training classes, counseling, and community outreach.⁶³ Finally, the commission secured funds to conduct an initial comprehensive health care survey of the Mexican American population. It also completed and published the first extensive statistical analysis on Hispanics in the Nebraska public schools.⁶⁴

By the end of 1974 the director and the members of the Mexican-American Commission could look back upon a respectable record of activity and accomplishment. The director's staff now numbered four and the budget had increased from its original \$29,628 to \$35,568. The commission began publishing a quarterly newsletter in April 1973, and, in its most significant action to establish its statewide credentials, opened a regional office in Scottsbluff in September 1974.⁶⁵

In his inaugural newsletter editorial Porras emphasized the theme of community as the greatest challenge facing the new agency:

It is the desire of this agency to attempt to unite the Raza of Nebraska so that together we can bring about some changes that will benefit us all. . . . To segregate ourselves because we do not wish to be called Mexican-American, Chicano, or whatever, would be to render ourselves impotent in the organizational effort and future cultural development of our state. Our interest should be to cultivate getting things done by as many people as are interested in doing, than without any one person telling the other what to do.⁶⁶

By the measure of getting things done, the commission considered itself off to a good start. The early years were not without controversy and challenges, however. While Porras and the commission were cataloging achievements, other voices questioned their effectiveness. By the time of his October 1974 editorial the director acknowledged as much:

The Commission is now well into its third year of operations, and as we all know it has had its share of problems, many of them we have solved, others are still pending, and most likely many more will crop up. But we will continue to deal with them accordingly.⁶⁷

Political radicalism, questions about the functioning of the commission, and doubts about whether a state agency could truly encompass the diverse interests of increasingly divided Mexican American and Chicano communities emerged to challenge the commission and its director.

In January 1973 Scottsbluff became the center of attention when members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) arrived to protest the recent arrests of Indian youths in Valentine and to forward earlier demands that Fort Robinson and other state lands be turned over to the tribes. The Native American leaders also sought to forge an alliance with the local Chicano community. AIM leaders approached Ramon Perez, director

“Our interest should be to cultivate getting things done by as many people as are interested in doing, than without any one person telling the other what to do.”

In January 1973 representatives of the American Indian Movement met with Chicano leaders in Scottsbluff to discuss forming an alliance to address problems faced by minorities in the Nebraska Panhandle. From left: Vernon Bellecourt, Ramon Perez, Mrs. Arturo Lerma, John Two Birds Arbuckle, and Leroy Casados. Used by permission, *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*



of the New Congress for Community Development, for support. A late night meeting at the Community Development headquarters concluded in a disturbance that drew local police and State Patrol officers in riot gear and brought the arrest of two AIM leaders. Over the following days tensions increased as a junior high school classroom was firebombed resulting in some sixteen arrests. Among those taken into custody was Leroy Casados, a Chicano organizer from Alliance, and Ramon Perez.⁶⁸

As the situation reached its peak, Governor Exon condemned the events in blunt terms. He termed the leadership of both AIM and the New Congress as irresponsible and self-serving and noted specifically:

Ramon Perez is no more a leader of the responsible Mexican American community in the state of Nebraska than [Russell] Means is the leader of the responsible Indian community in the state. They are troublemakers of a professional nature and they live and feed upon accusations against public officials of the state.⁶⁹

A week later both the chairman and the direc-

tor of the Mexican-American Commission commented on the controversy. Under the headline, "Director, Chairman Express Disapproval of Perez Tactics," Porras and Nick Garcia declared that the commission supported neither Perez nor the confrontation with authority. Porras stated:

I know there's discrimination out there—I was born and raised there. We agree with Ramon's wanting to change the system, but not his way. If change is to come, it can first only come from the Capitol, the seat of government. We're both looking for the same thing, but we have the commission and the lines of communication.⁷⁰

In response to his remarks, Porras received a stinging rebuke. Not from Ramon Perez, but from Joe Perez, Jr., director of the Platte Valley Community Action Agency in Grand Island. Speaking both personally, and as a representative voice for concerned citizens from the area, Perez analyzed the commission's statement in the following terms:

I find it very disgusting that through our positions in society whether through jobs or status we oppress our own people. What sets you so high above others whether you agree

with their point of view or not? We are all trying to solve the same problems of discrimination, social and cultural deprivation, high drop out rate, juvenile delinquency, etc. . . .

I honestly feel that at times through your actions and statements you really do not have the gall to stand up for what is right even if it causes you to stand up against the Governor. . . It is time to quit shaking hands and socializing and get down to the business at hand.⁷¹

Three months later a second and more formal rebuke appeared. On April 24, 1973, the Scottsbluff G.I. Forum sent a formal declaration of grievances to Governor Exon, Senator Carpenter, and the commission. Forum Chairman Gene Sanchez stated that the "Mexican people" were "gravely dissatisfied" with the commission, and specified eleven complaints. One echoed previous criticism regarding the Scottsbluff situation. Others were critical of the way the commission was conducting business. The list noted the absence of meeting minutes and public reports on fiscal and general activities. It also observed the commission's failure to communicate with the Mexican American community to such an extent that most did not even know of its existence, its members, and how they were appointed. The document concluded:

We want the Mexican American Commission to be accountable to the people they represent. The Commission should actively seek out the problems of our people, find workable solutions for them, and report on the progress of what they have done. We recommend and expect that some immediate action be taken by the Mexican American Commission to correct the above grievances.⁷²

The commission responded to these accusations at its subsequent meeting. Reported in the *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star* under the headline, "Commission Denies Chicano's Charges," Chairman Garcia stated that the charges were "not valid" but that the commission was open to suggestions for improvement. While voting to reaffirm its Scottsbluff statement, the body also voted to continue plans for an annual report and a newsletter. Porras explained, "You can't just overnight or in a year inform every Chicano in the state about the Commission. It is going to take time."⁷³

Ironically, while the commission meeting received public coverage, the body did not issue a formal reply to the charges the Forum had made to the governor. When Exon toured Scottsbluff a month later, a citizens' group asked him for an explanation. Exon told Porras that the citizens he

met with felt that the commission's activities were "over directed at the problems of the migrant workers to the detriment of our own Mexican American citizens." Porras responded that the critics missed the point; funds secured for migrant programs would be wide ranging and would benefit all of the members of the Mexican American communities.⁷⁴

Overall, however, the director seemed attuned to the criticism and in an end of the year message to the commissioners reported:

Having traveled throughout the state, speaking to different persons and organizations, one of the most heard complaints that I have received about the Commission has been that we are not reaching the people that we should, and that we in fact do not represent the Mexican American or Chicano community.⁷⁵

The Lyman School District investigation had also added fuel to the charges that the commission was not doing a good job of communicating with its constituencies. The proceedings of the public meeting held at the school in May 1974 were recorded, and Porras indicated that a transcription and a final report of the investigation would be forthcoming within a few weeks. Both the Lyman community and Rumaldo Lovato, a local activist who had helped organize the hearings, anxiously awaited the transcript and the report that by summer had still not been released.

The delay further aggravated the commission's problems. Commissioner Eli Cardona recognized the potential for harm. In a July letter to Porras and his colleagues, Cardona expressed concern about the image and effectiveness of the agency:

The Mexican American people will be watching the manner in which we handle the problem and every minute we delay will only emphasize our ineffectiveness to deal with problems of utmost importance to Mexican Americans. The problems in Education for our people require immediate attention. We have an opportunity to assist a school system and a community to deal with those problems and perhaps this matter should have top priority over other projects we are involved in at the present.⁷⁶

Cardona was correct. A week after Cardona sent his note, Lovato wrote Porras complaining that the community was not being kept abreast of events. He interpreted the delay as an indication of the commission's weakness. "If you do not know your own powers, or if you have no powers to

"You can't just overnight or in a year inform every Chicano in the state about the Commission. It is going to take time."

follow up on the Lyman issue, I would appreciate it that you and the whole Mexican American Commission either dissolve and form a more conscientious staff or take a stand and be recognized as an organized organization."⁷⁷

The situation became aggravated when Porras announced that the results of the hearing and a



Stanley Porras (r.) here in Washington, D.C., with Fernando E. D. De Baca, special assistant to the president, was the first executive director of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission. Nebraska Mexican-American Commission Newsletter 2, no. 7 (January 1976)

first draft of the report would be presented at the August commission meeting to be held in Lincoln. Lovato requested that the meeting be moved to Lyman. Noting that most of those concerned about the issue would not be able to make a trip to the capital city, he cautioned, "If you do go ahead and have the meeting in Lincoln, the people from the Lyman area will not be satisfied."⁷⁸ According to Joe Perez, Jr., director of the community action agency in Grand Island, "it seems that the Mexican American Commission is side stepping the issue at hand." He concluded, "This is not the first noted attempt by the Mexican American Commission to side-step issues of importance to the Chicanos of Nebraska."⁷⁹

In the spring of 1974 another dramatic event suggested that the commission and its director were failing to gain the full confidence of their community. In early March the UNL Mexican American Students Association (MASA) demanded the resignation of the three community representatives from the school's Mexican American Advisory Committee. They included commission chairman Nick Garcia and director Stan Porras. The students charged that the three had, "lost their effectiveness in advocating on the students' behalf and in the interest of people throughout the state." Although

committee chairman Dr. Ralph Vigil endorsed the three as individuals who "have done a great deal for Mexican Americans in Nebraska," Marty Ramirez, a Mexican American counselor at UNL, contended, "There is a lot of validity to the students' complaints." Ramirez defined the situation as "serious" and added, "it is not going to go away."⁸⁰

This development represented quite a change from events of the previous year. In May 1973 strong student support for the commission had been on display when one of the resolutions from a statewide Mexican American Education Conference called for a dramatic increase in the commission's budget. The resolution concluded by naming Marty Ramirez and Stan Porras, among others, to represent the conference participants in obtaining their objectives.⁸¹

Not long after MASA called for Porras to step down, a similar call surfaced from within the commission. Eli Cardona noted that the organization's April meeting conflicted with the Chicano Awareness Day program in Lincoln and the quarterly meeting of the American G.I. Forum in Grand Island and requested the meeting date be changed. Before the director could respond, headlines in the Lincoln Star announced, "Resignation of Porras Demanded." The article reported that the Scottsbluff American G.I. Forum had passed a motion "denouncing the Mexican American Commission and its director for unscrupulous and unethical consideration of Mexican American activities in the state," and had called for Porras's resignation.⁸²

Porras denied the charges in a press release, and in a letter reminded Cardona that the decision about when and where to meet had been made by a majority vote of the commissioners themselves:

I appreciate your concern and hope you realize the concern that this has placed upon myself and this office regarding the adverse publicity that this meeting has brought about; publicity that I consider unnecessary and tactics by individuals that have become inexcusable.⁸³

In a more reserved fashion, the Omaha Chicano Awareness Center alerted Porras that they had endorsed a motion calling for him to resign but would not make the resolution public until they had an opportunity to meet with him.⁸⁴

Ultimately Porras and the commission weathered the storm of protest. Porras continued as director until he chose to resign in January 1977. For the remainder of his term he maintained the

early successes and expanded the work of the commission, addressing issues of bilingual/bicultural education, and voter registration, and increasing the agency's budget and operations.⁸⁵

From the founding of the Nebraska G.I. Forums and the Mexican American Voters of Omaha, to the work of the Mexican-American Task Force and the establishment of the Chicano Awareness Centers, a common theme was an awakening of a Latino community in Nebraska. In a time of political and social change, that community divided over concepts of identity and strategies for effective action. Whether they called themselves Mexican American or Chicano, those returning from battlefields in Europe and Asia demanded more from themselves and their community. This meant the creation of an independent advocacy commission, and in the early 1970s Nebraska was distinguished with that outcome.

The challenge for the Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans and for its executive director was to find the best way to represent these constituencies. In this regard they were blazing a trail. Some six years after the commission's creation as an independent statutory agency, an evaluation noted,

The Nebraska Mexican-American Commission is unique in that it was the first commission of its kind established in the United States and did not have the opportunity to compare its operations with similar agencies across the country. As a result it had to evolve alone without the benefit of the experience of others.⁸⁶

As its first director, Stan Porras identified the path the commission would follow, and through his description of how he viewed the agency's role, he provided insight into the controversy it generated. As he wrote in the first issue of the commission's newsletter, "We are a liaison between the people and the state government. This is a service agency, not a force of power, and our concern is service not power."⁸⁷ That definition, put into action, proved the catalyst to highlight the divisions within the Nebraska community of La Raza during the first half of the 1970s. ☐

NOTES

Special thanks to the Nebraska State Historical Society research grant program, funded by the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation, and to the University of Nebraska at Kearney Research Services Council for providing financial support to conduct archival research.

¹ The first state-sanctioned body specifically directed toward the interests of the Mexican American community may have been the Colorado Commission on Spanish-Surnamed Citizens. Established by a joint resolution of the General Assembly in the spring of 1965, this commission functioned as a research body and produced a final report in January 1967 before disbanding. See *The Status of Spanish-Surnamed Citizens in Colorado*, January 1967; Robert Navarro to Frank Anaya, Dec. 30, 1971, Historical Box 3, office files, Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans, Lincoln (hereafter cited as Commission Office); Ralph F. Grajeda, "Chicanos: The Mestizo Heritage," in *Broken Hoops and Plains People, A Catalogue of Ethnic Resources in the Humanities: Nebraska and Thereabouts* (Lincoln: Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, 1976), 52; Roger P. Davis, "Latinos Along the Platte: The Hispanic Experience in Central Nebraska," *Great Plains Research*, 12 (Spring 2002): 43-46.

² "McGovern Campaign Aide says Mexican Factions Must Unite," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Oct. 29, 1971, 1.

³ "Scottsbluff will host Chicano Awareness Day Scheduled for September 11," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Sept. 2, 1971, 1.

⁴ "Speakers Emphasize Positive as Fiesta Del Valle Opens," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Sept. 19, 1971, 1.

⁵ For a detailed discussion see "A League of American Citizens," chap. 1 in Craig A. Kaplowitz, *LULAC: Mexican Americans, and National Policy* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 2005), 11-35. A good synopsis of the issue of race is presented by Oscar J. Martinez in *Mexican-Origin People in the United States: A Topical History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 74-76.

⁶ Peter J. Duignan and L. H. Gann, *The Spanish Speakers in the United States: A History* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1998), 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 63-65.

⁸ Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), 103-4.

⁹ Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation* (New York: Canfield Press, 1972), 208-10.

¹⁰ This summation of Mexican American activism is drawn from Duignan and Gann, *Spanish Speakers in the United States*; Acuña, *Occupied America*; and Martinez, *Mexican-Origin People*. A good collection of primary documents on the specific individuals and events can be found in Zaragosa Vargas, ed., *Major Problems in Mexican American History* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1999), and one of the best sources on Colorado and the Crusade for Justice is Ernesto B. Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice: Chicano Militancy and the Government's War on Discontent* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

¹¹ Dionicio Nodin Valdés, *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 178.

¹² Mary Lyons-Barrett, "Chicanos in Nebraska, 1940s Through the 1970s," *Journal of the West* 43 (Spring 2004): 78-85; Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*, 192; "G.I. Forum Grant Awarded," *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 4, 1974, 9.

¹³ "State's Silent Chicanos Want Into Melting Pot," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 14, 1971, 14; "Scottsbluff Chicano Cultural Center One of Two in Nebraska," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Oct. 2, 1971, 1.

¹⁴ "Scottsbluff Chicano Cultural Center One of Two in Nebraska," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Oct. 2, 1971, 1; Lyons-Barrett, "Chicanos in Nebraska," 82; "Chicano Cultural Center Nears Opening," *Lincoln Star*, June 29, 1972, 6.

¹⁵ Lyons-Barrett, "Chicanos in Nebraska," 82-83.

¹⁶ All quotes in this paragraph from "State's Silent Chicanos



Want into Melting Pot," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 14, 1971, 14.

¹⁷ "Scottsbluff Will Host Chicano Awareness Day Scheduled for September 11," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Sept. 2, 1971, 1; "Dancers Highlight Chicano Awareness Day," *ibid.*, Sept. 12, 1971, 1; "Mexican Awareness Week Begins," *ibid.*, Sept. 11, 1971, 9; "Speakers Emphasize Positive as Fiesta Del Valle Opens," *ibid.*, Sept. 19, 1971, 1.

¹⁸ Sam Franco, interview by author, August 2004. In a letter to the author, August 4, 2003, Senator J. James Exon identified Franco as "the key player" in the formation of the commission.

¹⁹ Franco, interview; "Carpenter Left Enduring Legacy," *Unicameral Update* 20, no. 23 (June 13, 1997): 11-12.

²⁰ Franco, interview; "Peralez Soars Into Challenge," *Lincoln Star*, Feb. 1, 1982, 13; "On the Go-Mexican American Commission," *Statehouse Observer* 2, no. 12 (June 1974): 6. This article indicates that Exon was approached with the commission idea as early as November 1970. For a brief biography of Peralez, see the Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 2, no. 7 (January 1976), issues available at the Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter cited as NSHS).

²¹ Norm Otto to Robert Navarro, Feb. 16, 1971, Historical Box 3, Commission Office; draft executive order to establish Mexican American Council, 1972 Boards and Commissions: Mexican-American Commission, Box 54, RG1, SG40, J. James Exon Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter cited as Exon Papers).

²² Franco and Ramon Perez to Norm Otto, Mar. 9, 1971, Historical Box 3, Commission Office.

²³ Press release, Nov. 1, 1971, Box 54, Exon Papers.

²⁴ Garcia to Exon, Dec. 14, 1971, Box 54, Exon Papers.

²⁵ Perez to Exon, Western Union Telefax, Nov. 3, 1971, Box 54, Exon Papers.

²⁶ Grajeda and Orta to Exon, Nov. 8, 1971, Box 54, Exon Papers.

²⁷ "Perez Denounces Methods Used by Exon to Name Commission," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Nov. 4, 1971, 3.

²⁸ Navarro to Exon, Sept. 19, 1971, Box 54, Exon Papers.

²⁹ B. N. Garcia to Exon, Oct. 18, 1971, Box 54, Exon Papers.

³⁰ "Perez Denounces Methods Used by Exon to Name Commission," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Nov. 4, 1971, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² All Franco quotes from *ibid.*

³³ Exon to Grajeda and Orta, Nov. 16, 1971, Box 54, Exon Papers.

³⁴ Meeting minutes, Dec. 10 and 11, 1971, Commission Office. Assisting the commission were Glen Soukup and Rudy Peralez from the Technical Assistance Agency.

³⁵ "Commission Will Seek Statutory Status," *Lincoln Star*, Dec. 11, 1971, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.* Garcia's initiative was apparently a reflection of

President Richard Nixon's recent concern about the national Cabinet Committee. Established in December 1969, the committee was practically inactive until August 1971. When the president finally met with the committee on August 5, he insisted that he wanted the committee, and the federal agencies represented, to be proactive on behalf of the Spanish-speaking. He had in mind middle-class Americans of his new majority, those who are "family oriented, law abiding people" like the Mexican Americans he knew in Whittier, California. He insisted that "government has the responsibility—private business does not move as fast in developing opportunities," and he did not want his administration "to be one that only responds to those who tear up the place and pound fists." See Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 140-42.¹

³⁷ Garcia to Ramirez, Dec. 22, 1971, Historical Box 3, Commission Office. In a second letter to Ramirez, following the success of the legislative bill, Garcia expanded upon the commission's role. He noted that "before the first meeting of this appointed Commission was held it was decided by the Commission members to recommend a state constituted Mexican-American Commission and all effort would be made to come to that end. It was at this time that your office was called upon to provide the technical assistance to formulate a proposed bill to be used to submit to the Nebraska Unicameral. . . . This commission could not have been formed in the extraordinary manner it was, without the co-operation of your office, possibly it may not have been formed at all." Garcia to Ramirez, Apr. 10, 1972.

³⁸ Meeting minutes, Dec. 10 and 11, 1971, Commission Office; Exon to Department Heads, Jan. 12, 1972; Exon to commission members, Jan. 24, 1972, both Box 54, Exon Papers.

³⁹ "Mexican-American Position to Garcia," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, Dec. 11, 1971, 13; "Mexican American Panel Meets Here," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Dec. 30, 1971, 2.

⁴⁰ Garcia to Perez and Garcia to Grajeda, both Dec. 14, 1971, Historical Box 3, Commission Office.

⁴¹ "Chicanos Protest State Commission," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Dec. 31, 1971, 2.

⁴² Meeting minutes, Jan. 29, 1972, Commission Office.

⁴³ "Liquor Bill Backed by C. U. Official," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 21, 1972, 4.

⁴⁴ Navarro, letter and prepared remarks, Jan. 20, 1972, Box 54, Exon Papers; "Chicano Group Wants to be Separate Entity," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Feb. 27, 1972, 1.

⁴⁵ Navarro, letter and prepared remarks, Jan. 20, 1972, Box 54, Exon Papers.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "Commission Wants Independent Status," *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star*, Feb. 27, 1972, 3B; "Chicano Group Wants to be Separate Entity," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Feb. 27, 1972, 1. Prior to the meeting Navarro mentioned in a brief note to the commissioners that Senator Mahoney also thought the commission would be better off as an independent agency. Navarro to commissioners, Feb. 9, 1972, Historical Box 3, Commission Office.

⁴⁸ Legislative Bill 1081, 2-3, Box 54, Exon Papers.

⁴⁹ Meeting minutes, Mar. 23, 1972; governor's office news release, May 16, 1972, both in Box 54, Exon Papers.

⁵⁰ Franco to Exon, Mar. 23, 1972, Box 54, Exon Papers.

⁵¹ Navarro to Exon, Jan. 17, 1972, Historical Box 3, Commission Office.

⁵² LB1081, 3-4. In the initial discussions about a commission, the governor's office had recommended the position of research director. The modifications submitted by Navarro specifically insisted upon an executive director. Franco and Perez to Otto, Mar. 9, 1971, Historical Box 3, Commission Office.



⁵³ "Commission Employs Porras as Director," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, June 28, 1972, 35; Porras biography, and Porras to Exon, Apr. 19, 1972, Box 9, RG0091, Records of the Nebraska Commission on Mexican-Americans, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter cited as NCMA Records, NSHS).

⁵⁴ Porras correspondence, July and August 1972, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁵⁵ Annual Report of the Executive Director for Fiscal Year 1972-1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS. Porras reported one instance of assisting a family improperly assessed \$500 by the city of Lincoln because of mistakes made by municipal personnel in reading sewage blueprints.

⁵⁶ Concepcion Montelongo to commission, Dec. 28, 1972; Sullivan to Porras, Jan. 16, 1973; Porras to Sullivan, June 22, 1973; Sullivan to Porras, June 29, 1973; Sullivan to Porras, Aug. 7, 1973; Porras to commissioners, Dec. 12, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS; Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (August 1973) and no. 7 (October 1974); meeting minutes, Apr. 27, 1974, Commission Office. Ironically Sam Franco, now with the Office of Highway Safety, prepared the new translation of the examination.

⁵⁷ Porras to Maj. E. P. Schroeder, letter and resolution, Sept. 12, 1972, Box 54, Exon Papers; "State Patrol Unlikely to Reduce its Height Requirement," *Lincoln Star*, Jan. 9, 1973, 1.

⁵⁸ Schroeder to Porras, Jan. 15, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS; "Carpenter Scores Patrol Height Requirement, Chides Kruger," *Lincoln Journal*, Apr. 6, 1973, 11; Exon to Kruger, Mar. 20, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁵⁹ "Scottsbluff May Get Job Center," *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Feb. 5, 1972, 1; "G.I. Forum Official Probes Program Here," *ibid.*, Feb. 19, 1972, 1; Porras to Exon, Nov. 2, 1972, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁶⁰ Sullivan to Carpenter, June 9, 1972, Box 54, Exon Papers; Porras to Exon, Nov. 2, 1972, and Porras to Ramona Blanco, Sept. 21, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁶¹ Porras to Soukup, Mar. 19, 1973, and Annual Report of the Executive Director for Fiscal Year 1972-1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁶² Porras to parents, Nov. 5, 1973; Cardona to Porras, Feb. 15, 1974; Porras to Darrel E. Schilz, Lyman Public Schools, Apr. 16, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS; *Mexican American Commission Educational Report of the Lyman Public School System* (October 1974), 7 and 10-32, Nebraska Documents, microfiche. M1500B001-1974.

⁶³ Porras to state government agencies, Jan. 16-20, 1975; Porras to agencies, Feb. 4, 1975; Porras to Affirmative Action Committee, June 20, 1975; J. V. Aguilar to Porras, Jan. 21, 1974; D. B. Varner to Porras, Jan. 24, 1974; UNL Mexican American Advisory Committee to Varner, Sept. 23, 1974; Varner to Porras, Feb. 10, 1975; Porras to Charles L. Wolff, warden, Nebraska Penal Complex, June 14, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS; *Statehouse Observer* 3, no. 12 (June 1975).

⁶⁴ Porras to Sen. George Gerdes, Sept. 18, 1972, and Gerdes to Porras, Apr. 5, 1973; Steve King, Commission Goals 1980-1981: Assessment, Box 4, NCMA Records, NSHS. The bibliography notes the following publications: *Mexican American Statistics in Nebraska's Educational Systems* (1975) and *La Voz de Los Estudiantes (The Voice of the Students)* (1975).

⁶⁵ Annual Report of the Executive Director for Fiscal Year 1972-1973; Audit: Report of Examination Mexican-American Commission, March 10, 1972, ending June 30, 1975; Porras to commissioners, Sept. 24, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS; Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 1, no. 7 (October 1974).

⁶⁶ Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 1, no. 1

(April 1973).

⁶⁷ Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 1, no. 7 (October 1974).

⁶⁸ "AIM Leaders Issue Threats," *Lincoln Star*, Jan. 12, 1973, 6; "Law Officers Keeping Vigil Over Gathering of Indians," *Lincoln Star*, Jan. 15, 1973, 7; "Scottsbluff Area is Reported Quiet Following Incidents Involving AIM," *Lincoln Journal*, Jan. 15, 1973, 6; "Firebombing Raises Scottsbluff Tension," *Lincoln Journal*, Jan. 16, 1973, 6; "Scuffle Leads to Several Arrests," *Lincoln Star*, Jan. 18, 1973, 8; "State Patrolmen Leave Scottsbluff," *Lincoln Journal*, Jan. 20, 1973, 10.

⁶⁹ "Leaders of Scottsbluff Disturbance Verbally Lashed, Warned by Exon," *Lincoln Journal*, Jan. 15, 1973, 6.

⁷⁰ "Director, Chairman Express Disapproval of Perez Tactics," *Lincoln Star*, Jan. 20, 1973, 9.

⁷¹ Joe Perez, Jr. to Porras, Jan. 29, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS. There is no evidence that Joe Perez Jr. is related to Ramon Perez of Scottsbluff.

⁷² Gene Sanchez to Exon, grievance report, Apr. 24, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS. One action of accountability that was taken was reported in the *Lincoln Journal*, Apr. 30, 1974, 21, under the headline, "G.I. Forum Disclaims N. Platte Group of Same Name." In a clear response to the actions in the western part of the state, the state headquarters of the G.I. Forum in Omaha declared that the North Platte Forum had never been properly chartered, and the state board passed a vote of confidence in the Mexican-American Commission and Director Stan Porras.

⁷³ *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star*, Aug. 12, 1973, 6B.

⁷⁴ Exon to Porras, Sept. 10, 1973, and Porras to Exon, Sept. 17, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁷⁵ Porras to commissioners, Dec. 4, 1973, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁷⁶ Cardona to Porras and commissioners, July 8, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁷⁷ Lovato to Porras, July 15, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁷⁸ Lovato to Garcia, July 17, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁷⁹ Perez, Jr. to commission, July 26, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁸⁰ All quotes in this paragraph from "Students Call for NU Committee Members' Resignations," *Lincoln Journal*, Mar. 21, 1974, 21. Ironically the third community member of the committee was Sam Franco, the founding father of the commission, who had resigned from the body shortly after it had become a statutory agency.

⁸¹ Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (August 1973).

⁸² Cardona to Porras, Mar. 28, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS; "Resignation of Porras Demanded," *Lincoln Star*, Mar. 30, 1974, 9.

⁸³ Porras to Cardona, Apr. 10, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁸⁴ Ramirez to Porras, Apr. 8, 1974, Box 1, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁸⁵ "Porras Resigns Mexican American Directorship," *Lincoln Star*, Jan. 29, 1977, 3; Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (December 1977).

⁸⁶ David T. Chinchin, *Evaluation of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission, April 1980*, 1, Box 8, NCMA Records, NSHS.

⁸⁷ Mexican-American Commission *Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (April 1973).