

## Service to Community and Country: Mexican-American residents of Yavapai County in the 1930s and 1940s



Courtesy Gilbert M. Orrantia  
Lt. Gilbert D. Orrantia at Souk El Arba, North Africa, far left, back row.

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Historians, in chronicling Arizona's eventful past, have tended to overlook the significant contributions of Mexican-heritage citizens of Prescott in the early 20th century. A review of local newspapers of the period reveals that Mexican-Americans served their community and their country with greater devotion than most people know. The pages of the Prescott Evening Courier of the 1930s and 1940s demonstrate convincingly that those citizens participated fully in the entire spectrum of community life, and in World War II numerous soldiers of Mexican heritage put their lives on the line as part of our national legacy of sacrifice.

There was a growing national trend in the 1930s to disparage non-Anglo cultures. As the Great Depression set in, there were efforts at both State and Federal levels to exclude Mexicans and even Mexican-Americans from the country and from the job market. Recognizing the importance of trade and good relations with Mexico, the editor of the Prescott Evening Courier spoke out against this trend in a May 16, 1930, editorial. Taking issue with a bill being considered by Congress, editor W. P. Stuart said, "By passing the bill which singled out the Mexicans for exclusion from the United States, the senators who voted for it displayed poor judgment and an utter lack of the sense of the fitness of things. The misguided few who honestly believe Mexicans are taking the jobs of Americans later on may find their vision was distorted. In some instances, the Latinos are doing work here that the citizens of this country could and would perform, but such cases are very much in the minority." (This particular bill was never enacted.)

During this era, Prescott residents such as Nellie and Theresa Martinez -- the former, a store clerk and musician; the latter, owner of a dance studio -- are named as leaders in social events and in charitable fundraising activities, particularly for the unemployed. Their names appeared and reappeared in news items throughout the period.



[Ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com)

Other examples can be found within the Courier's own staff. Beginning in 1929, the bylines of Mexican-born reporters Carlos Moreno and Tino (Faustino) López appeared continually in the sports section. Moreno, born around 1915, was active at Prescott High School in student government and was listed on the Courier staff as a "student reporter." He would have been about 14 when he began this journalistic involvement in 1929. The Courier sports pages confirm that he covered local sports until 1935.

López was an outstanding athlete at the high school, graduating in 1931. He

Staff Sgt. Rudy L. Olague, far right, back row. From

soon became a reporter. In 1934, he was noted as a key figure in installing a public magnetic scoreboard for the World Series for the benefit of baseball fans in Prescott. Also in 1934, there was mention of Lopez's involvement as athletic director and baseball coach at the local transient camp. This camp

apparently accommodated families as well as single homeless. López attended college in Flagstaff and later was employed in Phoenix. Sadly, he died in an auto accident in 1938. His Courier obituary stated that he had also been active in young political clubs around the state.

Many Mexican-heritage military combatants who served during World War II gave their lives for their country. The Prescott All Veterans Memorial lists casualties of World War II from Yavapai County. Among the 121 listed, 22 were of Mexican heritage. A review of military casualty records of those 22 reveals five Purple Hearts and 3 Bronze Stars, among other awards. Rudy L. Olague, a staff sergeant in the Army Air Corp's 322nd Bomber Squadron 91st Bomber Group, born in Ash Fork, was a radio operator who perished in 1943 when he and the entire crew of the "Chief Sly III" disappeared on a mission over Germany. For his service, he was awarded the Air Medal and the Oak Leaf Cluster.

The military records of those 22 casualties show they were all enlisted soldiers. But occasionally a Mexican-heritage soldier became an officer. One was pilot Lt. Gilbert Duran Orrantia, who grew up in Clarkdale. His story was retold in Francisco Villareal's book, Arizona's Hispanic Flyboys. He served in combat in North Africa. Later, when was sent stateside, he became an instructor in combat tactics. After his discharge in 1945, he earned his degree in Secondary Education at Arizona State College, and went on to become Foreign Language Department Chair at Mesa Community College.



Courtesy Gilbert M. Orrantia  
Lt. Gilbert D. Orrantia at the controls as a flight instructor in combat techniques, 1944.

The character of our Yavapai County and Prescott communities was deeply enhanced by the presence of Mexican heritage residents from the 1930s and into the end of World War II era. Their participation promoted greater equality and richness in our area, and helped to shape today's Prescott and Yavapai County.

"Days Past" is a collaborative project of the Sharlot Hall Museum and the Prescott Corral of Westerners International ([www.prescottcorral.org](http://www.prescottcorral.org)). This and other Days Past articles are also available at [www.sharlot.org/library-archives/days-past](http://www.sharlot.org/library-archives/days-past). The public is encouraged to submit proposed articles to [dayspastshmcourier@gmail.com](mailto:dayspastshmcourier@gmail.com). Please contact SHM Library & Archives reference desk at 928-445-3122 ext. 14, or via email at [dayspastshmcourier@gmail.com](mailto:dayspastshmcourier@gmail.com) for information.

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