

Carey McWilliams: The Zoot Suit Riots (1943)

On the evening of Thursday, June 3, the Alpine Club—a group made up of youngsters of Mexican descent—held a meeting in a police substation in Los Angeles. They met in the police station, at the invitation of an officer, because of the circumstance that the nearby public school happened to be closed. With a police officer present, they met to discuss their problems, foremost of which, at this meeting, was the urgent question of how best to preserve the peace in their locality. At the conclusion of the meeting, they were taken in squad cars to the street corner nearest the neighborhood in which most of them lived. The squad cars were scarcely out of sight when the boys were assaulted. Thus began the recent weekend race riots in Los Angeles.

On the following nights of June 4, 5, and 6, various attacks were made upon so-called "zoot-suiters" in Los Angeles. These attacks reached a fine frenzy on Monday evening, June 7, when a mob of a thousand or more soldiers and sailors, with some civilians, set out to round up all zoot-suiters within reach. The mob pushed its way into every important downtown motion-picture theater, ranged up and down the aisles, and grabbed Mexicans out of their seats. Mexicans and a few Negroes were taken into the streets, beaten, kicked around, their clothing torn. Mobs ranged the length of Main Street in downtown Los Angeles (a distance of some ten or twelve blocks), got as far into the Negro section as Twelfth and Central (just on the edge of the district), and then turned back through the Mexican sections on the east side. Zoot-suiters, so-called, were attacked in the streets, in the theaters, in the bars; streetcars were stopped and searched for Mexicans; and boys as young as twelve and thirteen years of age were beaten. Perhaps not more than half the victims were actually wearing zoot suits. In several cases on Main Street, in downtown Los Angeles, Mexicans were stripped of their clothes and left lying naked on the pavements (front-page pictures of these victims were gleefully displayed in such sedate sheets as the Los Angeles Times). During all of this uproar, both regular and special police were observed in the streets, outside the theaters, and, in some cases, they were even noted going ahead of the mob. That there was going to be trouble on Main Street on Monday night was known throughout the community for at least twenty-four hours in advance. Crowds collected there, in fact, in anticipation of the fracas. On the following nights the same type of rioting occurred on a smaller scale in Los Angeles, with similar disturbances in Pasadena, Long Beach, and San Diego.

Immediate responsibility for the outbreak of the riots must be placed upon the Los Angeles press and the Los Angeles police. For more than a year now, the press (and particularly the Hearst press) has been building up anti-Mexican sentiment in Los Angeles. Using the familiar Harlem crime-wave technique, the press has headlined every case in which a Mexican has been arrested, featured photographs of Mexicans dressed in zoot suits, checked back over the criminal records to "prove" that there has been an increase in Mexican "crime," and constantly needled the police to make more arrests. This campaign reached such a pitch, during the Sleepy Lagoon case in August 1942, that the OWI [Office of War Information] sent a representative to Los Angeles to reason with the publishers. The press was most obliging: it dropped the word "Mexican" and began to feature "zoot suit." The constant repetition of the phrase "zoot suit," coupled with Mexican names and pictures of Mexicans, had the effect of convincing the public that all Mexicans were zoot-suiters and all zootsuits were criminals; ergo, all Mexicans were criminals. On Sunday night and Monday morning (June 6 and 7), stories appeared in the press warning that an armed mob of five hundred zoot-suiters was going to engage in acts of retaliation Monday night (thus ensuring a good turnout for the show that evening).

At the time of the Sleepy Lagoon case last year, the police launched a campaign, which

coincided perfectly with the newspaper campaign, against "Mexican crime." Almost on the eve of a speech by Vice President Wallace in Los Angeles on the good-neighbor policy, police arrested more than three hundred Mexican youngsters in what the Los Angeles Times referred to as "the biggest roundup since prohibition days." At about this time, Captain Ayres of the sheriff's office submitted a report to the grand jury in which he characterized the Mexican as being "biologically" predisposed toward criminal behavior. For more than a year this campaign of police terrorization has continued. Prowl cars have been cruising through the Mexican section constantly, youngsters have been ordered off the streets and "frisked" whenever two or more have been found together, and persistent complaints of police brutality have issued from both the Mexican and the Negro communities. There are, of course, some fine officers on the force—men who know and understand the problem. To some extent, also, the police have been goaded into the use of repressive measures by the press and by the racebaiting of some local officials. The manner in which the problem of the Japanese evacuees has been kept before the public, for example, has had a tendency to make people race-conscious. Nor have some local officials yet changed their attitudes. "Mayor Pledges Two-Fisted Action. No Wrist Slap," read a headline in the Los Angeles Examiner (June 10). At the same time, the attitude of certain military officials has also been rather shocking.

The "official version" of the riots, adopted by all the major newspapers, is now as follows: the soldiers and sailors acted in self-defense, and most emphatically, there was no element of race prejudice involved ("ZootSuit Gangsters Plan War on Navy"—headline, the Los Angeles Daily News, June 8, 1943). This theory is desperately repeated, despite the fact that only Mexicans and Negroes were singled out for attack. As for prejudice against Mexicans—from whom we acquired so many elements of our "culture"—why, the very suggestion of such a thought would seem to be abhorrent to the post-riot conscience of every publisher in Los Angeles. In fact, the fanciest journalistic double talk that I have seen in the Los Angeles press during a residence of twenty-one years appeared in the editorials of June 11.

Several facts need to be rather dogmatically asserted:

1. There are no "zoot-suit" gangs in Los Angeles in the criminal sense of the word "gang." The pachuco "gangs" are loosely organized neighborhood or geographical groups; they are not tied together into an "organization." Many of them are, in effect, nothing more than boys' clubs without a clubhouse.
2. Juvenile delinquency has increased in Los Angeles since the war, but while delinquency among Mexican youth has risen as part of this general situation, it has actually increased less than that of other ethnic groups and less than the citywide average for all groups.
3. Much of the miscellaneous crime that the newspapers have been shouting about has been committed, not by youngsters, but by men.
4. While individual Mexicans may, in a few cases, have attacked soldiers and sailors (and, incidentally, the reverse of this proposition is true), it is merely the craziest nonsense to suggest that the soldiers and sailors were driven to mob violence in self-defense.
5. It should be kept in mind that about 98 percent of Mexican youth in Los Angeles is American-raised, American-educated. Like most second-generation immigrant groups, they have their special problems. But their actual record for law observance is, all things considered, exceptionally good.

While the riots have now subsided (business has been complaining about the cancellation of

military leaves), the situation itself has not been corrected. In the absence of a full and open investigation, the public has been left with the general impression (a) that the soldiers and sailors acted in self-defense; and (b) that, all things considered, the riots were "wholesome" and had a "good effect." Resentment of the riots in the Mexican and Negro communities has reached an intensity and bitterness that could not be exaggerated. While Governor Warren promptly appointed an investigating committee, it is painfully apparent that the committee intends to "report" and not to investigate. . . .

It requires no imagination to appreciate the consequences of these riots. According to the United Press (June 11), "Radio Tokyo yesterday seized upon the Los Angeles disorders." The exploitation of the riots by Axis propagandists, however, is only part of the story. One township alone, on the east side of Los Angeles, has provided twenty-seven hundred men of Mexican descent who are now serving in the armed forces. These men have families living on the east side. If space permitted, I should like to quote what a young army sergeant—of Mexican descent—said to me recently about the riots. It would make excellent copy.