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Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement. Video.
NLCC Educational Media, 1996.

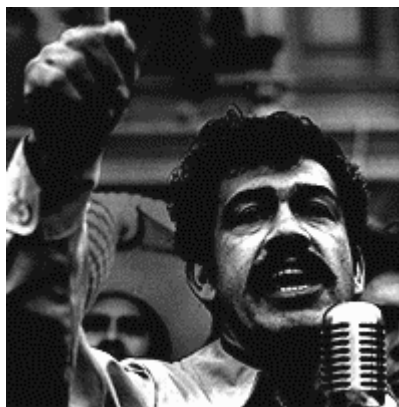


The 1960s was a turbulent decade in American history, fraught with conflicts over issues from Civil Rights to the war in Vietnam. The Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, one of the least studied social movements of the 1960s, encompassed a broad cross section of issues—from restoration of land grants, to farm workers rights, to enhanced education, to voting and political rights. The video documentary *Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, a four-part documentary series, corrects this oversight. Ground-breaking for the

material it covers, the series is one of the few to address the history of Mexican Americans in general and that of the Chicano Movement in particular; it is an indispensable resource for scholars and students.

Chicano! gives one a sense of the growing unrest of the Mexican American population. We witness, literally before our eyes, the emerging awareness of collective history, the power of mass action, and the evolution of the Chicano Movement. We learn that it begins in New Mexico with Reies López Tijerina and the land grant movement, is picked up by Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales in Denver who defines the meaning of Chicano through his epic poem *I am Joaquín*, embraces César Chávez and the farm workers, turns to the struggles of the urban youth, and culminates in growing political awareness and participation with La Raza Unida Party.

Part 1, "Quest for a Homeland," examines the beginnings of the movement by profiling Reies Lopez Tijerina and the land grant movement in New Mexico in 1966 and 1967. It shows how Tijerina's fight to convince the federal government to honor the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) galvanized Mexicans and Mexican Americans across the Southwest. It then moves on to discuss Rodolfo (Corky) Gonzales and his founding of the Crusade for Justice in Denver in 1966. Focusing on the importance of his poem *I am Joaquín*, it highlights how Gonzales reached out to Chicano youth. This segment is useful for its discussion of the roots of Chicano nationalism through its affirmation of cultural identity grounded in Aztec myths such as that of *Aztlán*, the mythical Chicano homeland.



Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales
From *Chicano!*
[28.8K](#) | [56K](#) | [Cable](#)

Part 2, "The Struggle in the Fields," examines the importance of [César Chávez](#) and his efforts to organize farm workers in the central valley of California. It delineates the various components of Chávez's strategy for farm worker self determination—strikes, boycotts, pilgrimages, fasts—and emphasizes his commitment to nonviolence and the importance of faith and prayer in achieving his goal.

Part 3, "Taking Back the Schools," is the best of the four parts. It covers the Los Angeles high school blow outs of 1968 thoroughly and with passion. Part 3 is also likely to be the most interesting to students because they can witness young people



Robert Kennedy with Harry Gamboa
From *Chicano!*
[28.8K](#) | [56K](#) | [Cable](#)

their own age forcefully agitating for change. It is also striking because the catalysts for the walk outs—high drop out rate, crumbling schools, lack of Mexican American teachers—still resonate today. This segment is visually interesting as well because the filmmakers made a conscious effort to interview actual participants (which they do in all the segments). Here they actually go back and forth between a photo or video of a participant from the 1960s to that same person being interviewed today, and it is insightful to see how that individual changed in the intervening thirty years. For example, at one point the video discusses how the students were trying to garner outside support for their cause in

order to legitimate it in the eyes of the school board. Robert Kennedy agrees to meet with student leaders and offer his support (he was running for president at the time and was in California to meet with César Chávez), and we see a picture of Kennedy surrounded by student leaders. The camera then focuses on a young [Harry Gamboa](#)—one of the walk-out leaders—standing next to Kennedy and the video then fades away to a current day interview with him.

Part 4, "Fighting for Political Power," discusses the creation of La Raza Unida Party as a third party force for political power and the importance of political rights. It culminates in the 1972 election and the Raza Unida convention, and the fragmentation of the party at the height of its membership and recognition.

Each of these hour-long parts may be viewed individually. (It would, in fact, be very rare for a teacher to be able to devote all four hours to class time, even one specifically dealing with Chicano history.)

Nearly every segment, to its credit, treats the historical background surrounding the events. For example, "Quest for a Homeland" briefly discusses the Mexican American War and the [Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo](#) and why Tijerina felt that he was right to fight for the land. Similarly, "Fighting for Political Power" explains the inequities of voting rights in Texas along with the history of unequal distribution of political power in Crystal City, Texas, the birth place of [La Raza Unida Party](#). Despite the fact that Mexican Americans made up the majority of the population in the city, no one of Mexican descent held political office. *Chicano!* is very good at explaining the plight of Mexican Americans historically and during the Chicano



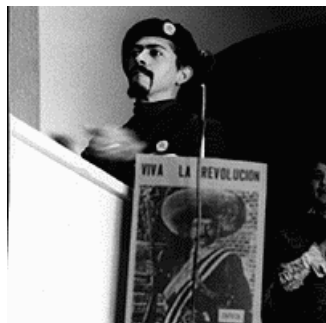
The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
From *Chicano!*
[28.8K](#) | [56K](#) | [Cable](#)

Movement. The series provides a keen sense of what it was like to have brown skin in the 1960s. One interviewee, for example, remembers that farm workers were thought of as ignorant, lazy, stupid, and dirty. In another segment, a second interviewee recalls that being Mexican was a burden—Mexican Americans were not respected and were treated as second-class citizens.

As with most documentaries, *Chicano!* makes excellent use of photo archives and film footage of the period. It succeeds where many documentaries fail in that the filmmakers were able to interview the actual participants in the events, as opposed to only scholars of the subject. Furthermore, the documentary series is to be commended for attempting to provide a balanced portrait of events. In the segment on the farm workers and César Chávez, we hear from farm owners whose produce was boycotted and land picketed at the height of the protests. Similarly, for the segment on the Los Angeles high school walk outs of 1968, the filmmakers interviewed both school board members and high school officials who were there at the time.

Not only do the four segments illuminate distinct aspects of the movement (land, farm workers, politics, urban issues, education), but they also attempt to delineate the diversity of the Chicano Movement not merely through causes, but also through geography and demographics. The viewer learns of rural problems in California which are in stark contrast to those of New Mexico. The documentary distinguishes between issues surrounding the high school walk outs in L.A., as opposed to those behind the [Crystal City, Texas](#) walk outs. The former occurred over drop-out rates and lack of recognition of Chicano culture and history, the latter due to Chicanas being barred from cheerleading. The students from L.A. never really had their concerns addressed, while the students in Crystal City won their cause, leading in part to the galvanization of the Raza Unida Party. We learn of the differing political agendas of Chicano leaders across the Southwest: Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, and California (Arizona is conspicuously left out of the equation).

While the discussion of the broad spectrum of issues across the Southwest is a strength of the series, it is also a weakness. Those whose only exposure to Mexican American history is through this series, would be left with the impression that Mexican Americans only live in the Southwest and that only the states covered had active Chicano movements. This, of course, is not the case. Strong Chicano and

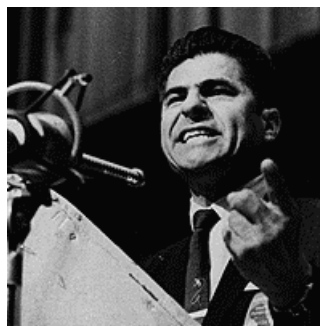


Alurista
From *Chicano!*

Mexican American communities exist throughout the country and nearly all of them, particularly those in the Midwest, agitated for change. They all had their own movements at the local level and participated in activities at the national level. This shortcoming is, of course, a function of the series' length, and the filmmakers do make token references to other parts of the country. For example, during a segment on the Crusade for Justice and the first Chicano Youth Conference in Denver in 1967, the poet Alurista remarks how he was amazed to see so many Chicanos from all over the country, even Kansas. "I didn't know,"

he remarks incredulously, "there were any Mexicans in Kansas!" Similarly, in the series' discussion of the growth of La Raza Unida Party, narrator Henry Cisneros notes that chapters of the party proliferated throughout the country, even in Nebraska.

What the individual videos do not do, however, is discuss the outcomes of the events in question or their significance. In Part 1, "Quest for a Homeland," the filmmakers move from discussing Tijerina and the question of land grants to Corky Gonzales and the Crusade for Justice. The transition is fine, but we never find out what happened to Tijerina and his cause. The viewer is left hanging, with no information. This also occurs in Part 3 "Taking Back the Schools." This segment follows the sequence of events that led to the Los Angeles student walk outs of 1968, culminating in the galvanization of the community to have [Sal Castro](#), a teacher who supported the walk outs, reinstated after being fired by the school board. We are treated to video of the students' take over and sit in of the school board and their ultimate success in having Castro re-hired, but we are never told what happened with the students' original demands of the school board (bilingual education, Mexican American history courses, more Mexican American teachers). The film would have you believe that the walk outs were a success because the community came together in support of Castro. It never goes on to explain that the state of the schools remained virtually the same.



Reies López Tijerina
From *Chicano!*

Also, *Chicano!* never explains until the end of the final video the continuing and overarching significance of the Chicano Movement and its legacy. It defines these as the new awareness of farm workers, increased labor activism, and growing visibility of educational and community needs. According to the documentary, the Chicano Movement galvanized and trained a new generation of activists and leaders and brought to a national stage a variety of issues important to the Mexican American community. However, the significance of each event needs to be further highlighted at the end of each segment for it to be truly effective.



The Legacy of the Chicano Movement
From *Chicano!*
[28.8K](#) | [56K](#) | [Cable](#)

For any one teaching about the Civil Rights Movement, Mexican American, Chicano, or Latino history, or the history of political activism, however, the series is a must see. Students will greatly benefit from this remarkable series about an extraordinary time in history.

[Valerie Mendoza](#)

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Video Review of ***Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement.***
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