

Activism and change

TRICENTENNIALTHEME: Heritage and Diversity

SUBJECT: Social Studies

GRADEBAND/LEVEL: Middle School/Grades6-8

WRITTENBY: The Institute of Texan Cultures Department of Education

TEKS:




6 th	7 th	8 th
113.18.2B;3A	113.19.1A;2C	113.20.11A-C



DESCRIPTION:

The Tejano experience includes working to create a more just society through struggles for educational rights, worker's rights, and political inclusion. While there have been gains, the quest for equal protection of the law and the ability to participate equally as Americans is ongoing. The Tejano experience includes working to create a more just society through struggles for educational rights, worker's rights, and political inclusion. This series of activities can be broken into several classes or used individually as desired.

LESSON OBJECTIVES:

-  Understand that Tejanos fought against inequalities to help create a more just society.
-  Analyze how the activism of others can have a lasting impact on society.
-  Discuss how the fight for equal rights of Tejanos continues today.

MATERIALS/PREPARATION NEEDED:

- Each event highlighted in the activity is broken into 4 sections: Cigar Strike & Activist Beginnings, Pecan Shellers' Strike, Moving Away, and Return to San Antonio & Remembrance. Influences & Time is to be used as a class example.
- Print two copies of the four sections to make a total of eight. Cut out the source materials from each section and place them in a respective folder or envelope.
- Break students into 8 groups and give each group a different folder or envelope.
- It is important to do Influences & Time as a class if you feel your students may struggle or need a clear understanding of project expectations.



ENGAGE (Opening Activity - Access Prior Learning / Stimulate Interest / Generate Questions):

The Life of Emma Tenayuca - This activity allows students to use critical thinking skills to build a visual timeline of Emma Tenayuca's life based on quotes and pictures. Uncited quotes and pictures can be found in our digital collections, <http://digital.utsa.edu/>.

EXPLORE (Probing or Clarifying Questions):

Article and Discussion - This activity helps students get the complete picture of Emma Tenayuca's life. Students will also discuss the meaning of being an activist.

EXPLAIN (Concepts Explained):

Tejano Activist: Visual Timeline Project – Students will research a Tejano activist and develop a timeline for their life, highlighting the events that contributed to social change. Our Hands-On History: A Guide to Historical Research (<http://www.texancultures.com/assets/1/15/Historical%20Research%20Guide.pdf>) can help students review how to develop research questions.

ELABORATE (Applications and Extensions):

Tejano Activist: RAFT Writing – Students will think about the point of views affected by their activist and write from a different perspective.

EVALUATE:

Check for understanding by asking probing questions and evaluating student responses.

Class Example: Influences and Time



I could not help but be impressed by the discussions inside of my family, my family circle. Also, the Plaza de Zacate was the type of place where everyone went on Saturdays and Sundays to hold discussions. If you went there, you could find revolutionists from Mexico holding discussions. I was exposed to all of this.

– Emma Tenayuca

Emma Tenayuca was born in 1916 in San Antonio, Texas. She grew up in a time when Mexican-Americans had very little freedom.

– From an online biography of Emma Tenayuca

In 1929, the Wall Street crash; in 1932, the closing of all the banks... My grandfather lost some money in one of them, and he didn't tell anybody. The person he told, I mean...he came over to me and told me, he says, "I've lost everything I have." And he was already about, I guess, 65, close to 70. So, I don't know, I felt that had an awful effect on me.

– From oral history interview with Emma Tenayuca

T: But I was raised by my grandparents...my sister and I were raised by our grandparents.

T: Then, well, my grandfather...I don't know whether he read Spanish, but he certainly read English. Well, he would always take...the whole family took an interest in politics.

P: Was your grandfather interested in labor issues as well?

T: He was very interested; he was certainly interested in civil rights, as far as Catholics were concerned. And he knew that we were, at that time, I guess, a minority and certainly a minority here.

– From oral history interview with Emma Tenayuca (Represented with a "T")

Section 1: Cigar Strike and Activist Beginnings



Tenayuca participated in the picket line and was arrested. She sympathized with the female labor force of the Finck Cigar Company especially because neither the local machine-run government nor the Catholic Church seemed to care about them.

– From an online biography of Emma Tenayuca

In 1936 Tenayuca joined the Communist Party.

– From an online biography of Emma Tenayuca



P: How did you get involved? Were you involved with the cigar strike?

T: Oh, yes. Well, I had become very, very interested in the labor movement. I mean, I had...first there were the anarchists and so forth. And then you had, also, the influence in the CTM [Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico]

T: The salvation of all those who were hungry...and there were many. And what I saw here...it's only recently that I have been able to talk about some of the things that I saw here. I mean as far as poverty – because it was just too difficult. So, the cigar strikers were among the first...they were women. It's peculiar; it's the women...I mean, COPS women...it's the women who have led.

– From oral history interview with Emma Tenayuca (Represented with a “T”)

By 1937 Emma held a leadership role with the Workers Alliance of America, a group that sought to unite organizations of unemployed and industrial workers. She delivered fiery speeches to Hispanic audiences and led sit-down strikes at the Works Progress Administration (WPA) headquarters and at City Hall. Looking back, she explained what drove her to take such dangerous actions: “I carried an Indian name. And I was very, very conscious of that. It was this historical background and my grandparents’ attitude which formed my ideas and actually gave me that courage to undertake the type of work I did in San Antonio.”

– From a newsletter about Emma Tenayuca

Emma Tenayuca was just sixteen years old in 1932 when she joined a strike of women cigar makers.

– From a newsletter about Emma Tenayuca

Section 2: Pecan Shellers' Strike

In January 1938, when pecan shellers in San Antonio walked out of their jobs, they looked to Emma for leadership.

She immediately joined them. Their ranks swelled to between six and eight thousand strikers. Emma was arrested and released along with hundreds of others.

– From a newsletter about Emma Tenayuca

Given her Communist Party affiliation, Tenayuca became an easy target; and soon UCAPAWA pressured Tenayuca to step down as a leader.

– From an online biography of Emma Tenayuca

Unwilling to pay higher wages in the future, the industry reverted back to mechanization, eliminating thousands of jobs in the process.

– From an online biography of Emma Tenayuca



In less than two months, the pecan-shellers forced the owners to raise their pay. The Pecan-Shellers' Strike is considered by many historians to be the first significant victory in the Mexican-American struggle for political and economic equality in this country.

– From an online biography of Emma Tenayuca

During the 1930s, the nation's pecan production was centered in San Antonio. Although the industry had mechanized, it reverted back to hand labor because of the abundance of cheap labor in Texas. The Mexican laborers worked in crowded spaces with inadequate sanitary facilities, with poor ventilation and illumination, and with the brown dust from the pecans hanging heavy in the air. Wages in this female-dominated industry stood at \$2.73 a week per worker. In January 1938 these meager wages were cut, sparking a strike involving twelve thousand workers, members of the International Pecan Sellers Union No. 172, affiliated with the United Cannery and Agricultural Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), a Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) union.

– From an online biography of Emma Tenayuca

Section 3: Moving Away

Then a dispute over leadership arose between the Workers Alliance and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Emma's Communist affiliations were used to discredit her. Although she agreed to take a background role for the duration of the strike, she continued to write flyers and provide support behind the scenes. In 1939 the young activist was meeting with Communist Party members inside the new municipal auditorium. A crowd stormed the building, smashing windows and attacking participants. Emma managed to escape, but she never again led a major labor protest.

– From a newsletter about Emma Tenayuca

When I left here, about '48, '49, I couldn't have gotten a job; I couldn't obtain a job; I couldn't do anything. None of the unions would have...although they sought my help when they got out on strike – laundry workers, cement workers, etc. Again, I continued to help, but I just didn't...I felt, well, what mischief.

And I was beginning to miss more and more meals, so...I've come from a family of eleven; I was one of the oldest. I couldn't get a job, I couldn't help, I couldn't do anything, so I left San Antonio.

– From oral history interview with Emma Tenayuca



August 25, 1939 - Tenayuca prepares to speak at a meeting of the Communist Party when a riot breaks out at Municipal Auditorium.

– From an online biography about Emma Tenayuca

P: After the activities in '38, '39, did you make it a conscious decision to retire from labor organizing?

T: No, it was forced on me because I couldn't find jobs, so I left and...

P: You left in '48, you say?

T: About '48 or '49.

P: What did you do during the period 1940 to '48? Is that when you were just looking for work?

T: Well, I was doing...I held a job here for a while; I held another job; these were very poor-paying jobs. I wanted to go to school; I went to school here for about a year and a half at night, and yes, I told you, the organization continued.

– From oral history interview with Emma Tenayuca (Represented with a "T")



Section 4: Return to San Antonio & Remembrance

I went to San Francisco and stayed there for twenty years, and to my surprise, I return and I find myself some sort of a heroine.

Well, I'll tell you the truth... If I had not been...one of the first things that threw me into the limelight is this nomination for the Texas Hall of Fame. (Laughter) And I sat right here and talked to a woman from Austin, and I said, "I don't want to go down." She said, "You've got to come down." I talked to her over the phone just a couple of days ago because I told her I was going to the hospital. And I just wondered whether I should have or not, because if the principles of labor...if the principles are gone on which this country are based...if they cannot be recognized by the modern generation and carried on...

– From oral history interview with Emma Tenayuca

In 1987, she told Jerry Poyo, with the Institute for Texan Cultures Oral History Program, "What started out as an organization for equal wages turned into a mass movement against starvation, for a minimum-wage law, and it changed the character of West Side San Antonio."

During Emma Tenayuca's 1999 eulogy, writer Carmen Tafolla read: *"La Pasionaria, we called her, because she was our passion, because she was our heart -- defendiendo a los pobres, speaking out at a time when neither Mexicans nor women were expected to speak at all."*

– From an online biography about Emma Tenayuca



She moved to California in 1946, where she earned a college degree and stayed for many years. Returning to San Antonio in the late 1960s, she was amazed to find herself hailed as "some sort of heroine." Emma Tenayuca later earned a master's degree in education at Our Lady of the Lake University and taught in San Antonio public schools until retiring in 1982. She died of Alzheimer's disease in 1999. People still remember her as La Pasionaria for her fierce defense of the working poor.

– From a newsletter about Emma Tenayuca

Emma Tenayuca died on 23 July 1999, receiving many tributes from the city that had once shunned her.

– From an online biography about Emma Tenayuca



Article and Discussion
La Pasionaria:
The Story of Emma Tenayuca

Emma Tenayuca was just sixteen years old in 1932 when she joined a strike of women cigar makers. Born in San Antonio, she grew up in an atmosphere of fervent talk and political action.

“I could not help but be impressed by the discussions inside of my family, my family circle. Also, the Plaza de Zacate was the type of place where everyone went on Saturdays and Sundays to hold discussions. If you went there, you could find revolutionists from Mexico holding discussions. I was exposed to all of this.”

By 1937 Emma held a leadership role with the Workers Alliance of America, a group that sought to unite organizations of unemployed and industrial workers. She delivered fiery speeches to Hispanic audiences and led sit-down strikes at the Works Progress Administration (WPA) headquarters and at City Hall. Looking back, she explained what drove her to take such dangerous actions: “I carried an Indian name. And I was very, very conscious of that. It was this historical background and my grandparents’ attitude which formed my ideas and actually gave me that courage to undertake the type of work I did in San Antonio.”

In January 1938, when pecan shellers in San Antonio walked out of their jobs, they looked to Emma for leadership. She immediately joined them. Their ranks swelled to between six and eight thousand strikers. Emma was arrested and released along with hundreds of others. Then a dispute over leadership arose between the Workers Alliance and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Emma’s Communist affiliations were used to discredit her. Although she agreed to take a background role for the duration of the strike, she continued to write flyers and provide support behind the scenes.

In 1939 the young activist was meeting with Communist Party members inside the new municipal auditorium. A crowd stormed the building, smashing windows and attacking participants. Emma managed to escape, but she never again led a major labor protest.

Employers blacklisted her. As a result, Emma was unable to find work in San Antonio. She moved to California in 1946, where she earned a college degree and stayed for many years. Returning to San Antonio in the late 1960s, she was amazed to find herself hailed as “some sort of heroine.”

Emma Tenayuca later earned a master’s degree in education at Our Lady of the Lake University and taught in San Antonio public schools until retiring in 1982. She died of Alzheimer’s disease in 1999. People still remember her as *La Pasionaria* for her fierce defense of the working poor.

The San Antonio Pecan Shellers’ Strike of 1938

San Antonio’s most bitter and protracted labor struggle during the Great Depression was the pecan shellers’ strike.

Pecan shelling, the least desirable of all factory work, was done almost exclusively by Tejanos. Men handled the “cracking,” or breaking of the shells, while women did the more tedious work of picking the nutmeat from the shell. In the process, workers cut and bruised their fingers and suffered respiratory illnesses from inhaling particles of pecan dust. Children as young as eight years old worked at the factories. A pecan shelling “factory” might consist of nothing more than a rented shed furnished with wooden tables and benches.

In 1938 companies announced a wage reduction to four cents a pound. Six thousand pecan workers walked away from their jobs—a huge number for the time period, when San Antonio’s population was one-fourth of its present size. Twenty-one-year-old Emma Tenayuca rallied the workers with rousing speeches. Several hundred were arrested.

The strike gathered wide community support. The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom set up a soup kitchen, feeding over one thousand strikers a day.

During the strike, charges of police misconduct abounded—tear gassing, clubbing, harassment, brutality, and threats of deportation. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sought an injunction to stop the mass arrests, but their request was denied. After weeks of conflict, the strikers won an improved contract of seven cents per pound of pecans.

In many ways, it was a bittersweet victory. Small operators responded to the new wages by closing up shop, while large operators converted to machine shelling. Jobs for pecan shellers fell by 75 percent. Nonetheless, the strike empowered Tejano laborers to believe that their voice could be heard at City Hall. They resolved to reject substandard conditions and drew inspiration from the strike for new organizing efforts.

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Discussion Questions:

- How did your visual timeline match up to the real story of Emma Tenayuca’s life?
- What made Emma Tenayuca an activist? What was she fighting for?
- What surprised you about Emma Tenayuca’s story?
- Was Emma Tenayuca’s cause worth fighting for? Why or why not?
- Can you think of an important cause worth fighting for today?

Tejano Activists: Visual Timeline Project

Students will complete a small group research activity on an activist or event that contributed to Tejano rights.

Directions:

- Begin activity by discussing what it means to be an activist.
 - **Guiding Questions:**
 - What would cause someone to speak out against an official or a rule?
 - Can you think of any rights movements that have happened in the United States?
 - Is it possible for everything to be fair in a society? Why or why not?
 - Think about the previous activity, what made Emma Tenayuca an activist?
- Tell students that they will be researching an activist, major event or organization that helped strengthen Tejano rights.
- At the teacher’s discretion, divide students into partners or small groups. Then assign groups a person or topic. A list (below) has been provided of people, organizations and events, but there are many more. Feel free to use your own list or allow students to come up with their own person or topic.
- Students will research their topic & develop a visual timeline like the one created in “The Life of Emma Tenayuca” activity. Students may choose to create it on paper or digitally.
- Our [Hands-On History: A Guide to Historical Research](#) is a great resource for students to use while researching. It will help students develop research questions and create a plan of action.
- The visual timeline will highlight why this person or topic is important in history.
 - Include a title page:
 - A picture or symbol that represents the person or topic
 - A title that explains the importance of the person or topic
 - At least five major milestones must be included in the project.
 - Each milestone must be a page. Within each milestone, include:
 - A picture or a symbol
 - Important dates
 - A summary
 - Three or more important points from your time period (these can be drawn or written)
 - A dynamic or interesting subtitle for the time period/milestone
- Have students present their completed projects to the class.

Activist, Events, and Organizations		
Gus Garcia	George I. Sánchez	Crystal City school walkout in 1969
Jovita Idár	Leonor de Villegas de Magnón	LULAC
Jovita Gonzalez Mireles	Edmundo E. Mireles	In Re Ricardo Rodríguez
Felix Tijerina	María L. de Hernández	Starr County Strike
Raymond L. Telles	William C. Velásquez	Dr. Clotilde P. Garcia
Henry B. González	Hector P. García	Manuela Solís Sager

Tejano Activists: RAFT

Students will show individual understanding of their Tejano Activists project by completing a writing activity from the perspective of their topic or person.

- Explain to students the concept of RAFT. Students will need to complete their R.A.F.T chart before writing.
- R.A.F.T writing allows students to write from a different perspective. It is a great way for students to step into the shoes of another person or even an inanimate object. This activity will allow students to demonstrate their individual knowledge of their activist topic.
- R.A.F.T stands for:
 - **Role of the Writer:** Who are you writing as? A specific person? You can even be an object.
 - **Audience:** Who is your audience?
 - **Format:** What format will you use? For example: A news article, journal entry, letter
 - **Topic:** What are you writing about?
- Once students have completed their RAFT chart, share some ideas as a class. This will give struggling students a chance to come up with an idea.
- Younger students may need to be given a prompt or work as a group to complete their RAFT chart.
- Give students time to write quietly. This part of the activity should be done individually.

R.A.F.T Chart Example

Section	Description	Student Response
Role of the Writer:	Who are you writing as? A specific person (at a certain time)? You can even be an object.	<i>I am Emma Tenayuca, and this is the first time I am arrested at the Finck Cigar Strike.</i>
Audience:	Who is your audience?	Emma Tenayuca is talking to herself
Format:	What format will you use? For example: A news article, journal entry, letter	Journal Entry
Topic:	What are you writing about?	Emma Tenayuca's feelings about participating in her first strike.

