


## Roman Mejias: Houston's first major league Latin star and the troubled legacy of race relations in the lone star state.

Source:  Nine

Publication Date: 22-SEP-01

During the 1999 baseball season, businessman and owner of the Houston Astros Drayton McLane was involved in a controversy with the Texas Hispanic community. According to Marco Comancho, general manager of KTMD Television and a subsidiary of the Telemundo, and Rod Rodriguez, the station's sales manager, McLane made disparaging and belittling comments regarding Mexicans and Mexican Americans shortly before a dinner honoring the businessman with the Houston Advertising Federation's Trailblazer Award for service to the community. An outraged McLane vehemently denied having uttered any remarks that might be construed as racist.

Following an investigation of the incident, Telemundo's chief executive, Roland Hernandez, apologized to McLane, stating that he found no evidence of racially biased comments being made by the baseball owner. In a prepared statement, a relieved McLane insisted, "Having spent a lifetime honoring the values of integrity and honesty, this episode has been unsettling. Despite a rush to judgment by some, this action by Telemundo, hopefully, will help to speed the healing process." (1)

But if McLane devoted his life to the values of integrity, honesty, and community service, why were so many in the Hispanic community so quick to question the baseball executive's motives? The answer to this question may lie in the troubling history of race relations in the Lone Star State of Texas, where, in the words of Carey McWilliams, "Anglos have always been 'gringos' to the Hispanos while Hispanos have been 'greasers' to the Anglos." (2) In *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, Rodolfo Acuna asserts that racial animosities in Texas are a result of Anglo economic domination of the Mexican community enforced by official state violence, such as that perpetuated by the Texas Rangers, an organization so much admired by the dean of Texas historians, Walter Prescott Webb. (3) Jose Angel Gutierrez, as well as other Chicano activists, argues that education in Texas is presented from an Anglo perspective, ignoring the fact that "the land of the West and Southwest, beginning with Texas, was stolen from Mexico ns." (4) While less confrontational and more scholarly in its approach, David Montejano's study of Anglos and Mexicans in Texas, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, which received the 1988 Frederick Jackson Turner Award from the American Historical Association, maintains that the history of Texas has been Anglo economic control perpetuated by cultural, political, and social Jim Crow legislation, the hegemony of which has been challenged by the Chicano civil rights movement. (5)

It is within this historical context that the alleged racist remarks of Astros owner McLane must be placed. While the Houston organization has produced such talented Latin players as Jose Cruz and Joaquin Andujar, it should be noted that Astros management, unlike the Los Angeles Dodgers with the marketing and pitching success of Fernando Valenzuela, has tended to maintain an Anglo identity, building the team around such stars as Nolan Ryan, Jeff Bagwell, and Craig Biggio. While it is impossible to deny the athletic achievement of these ballplayers, the failure to develop and especially market more Latin star players flies in the face of southwestern demographics. From a 1980 base of 8.7 million people of Mexican origin, there was an increase of 4.7 million to a 1990 total of 13.4 million, a 54 percent intercensal increase. And the Mexican-origin people constitute approximately two-thirds of Latins, who, in turn, comprise more than 8 percent of the U.S. population. Nearly 75 percent of all Mexican-origin persons live in California and Texas, both of which have populations in excess of 25 percent with Mexican roots. (6)

Yet, the Major League Baseball establishment in Houston has historically failed to capitalize on these demographics by consistently developing and marketing Latin talent. While perhaps operating on an unconscious level, this policy, nevertheless, may be reflective of the city's conservative to reactionary political traditions. According to Don E. Carlton, the Houston establishment's fears of growing diversity in the city produced a right-wing backlash, which labeled efforts at city planning and zoning as communist plots. City biographer George Fuermann argues that Houston has been dominated by merchants and businessmen, whose goals have been material, rather than altruistic, humanitarian, or community oriented. In fact, Houston's greatest claim to fame, embodied in the hyperbole of the Astrodome as the ninth wonder of the world, may be as the most air-conditioned city in the world. (7) According to city historian David G. McComb, "There is nothing closer to hell in modern America than to be caught after a rain in a Houston traffic jam in an un-air-conditioned car. It is possible, at that moment, to appreciate the plight of a steamed clam, and the situation does nothing to improve human temperament." (8) The Houston way of coping with this environment has been to build huge structures of steel and concrete while paying little attention to zoning and creation of open space.

REACTIONARY

But while progressive in providing air-conditioned structures, Houston tends to maintain a more reactionary political framework. Francisco A. Rosales and Barry J. Kaplan maintain that nineteenth-century values have retained a stronghold in Houston, arguing, "Individualism, opportunity, capitalism, and limited government, virtual dogma in American government before the 1929 crash, have remained sacred in Houston." (9) Thus, when Major League Baseball came to Houston in 1962, the city's baseball fathers elected to fashion the team's identity and logo with the Colt .45, the gun that tamed the West and, by implication, the Mexican and Native American populations, making way for the progress of Anglo civilization. (10) While the smoking Colt .45 logo embraced the symbolic values of nineteenth-century Texas, the Houston franchise's handling of its first Latin star, Cuban-born Roman Mejias, demonstrated a lack of sensitivity and appreciation for the potential of the city's Spanish-speaking community. Drafted from the Pittsburgh Pirates organization, Mejias would lead the fledgling Houston team in home runs and runs batted in while hitting for a .286 average. Following his banner year in Houston, Mejias was traded to the Boston Red Sox for singles-hitting Pete Runnels, an Anglo who hailed from nearby Pasadena, Texas. The story of Roman Mejias suggests that Houston management failed to market and develop Mejias as a star, establishing a club tradition of extolling Anglo players while eschewing the potential of the Latin community and falling into the pattern of racial segregation that has characterized the troubled history of race relations in the Lone Star State. (11)

Roman Mejias was born August 9, 1932 (although some accounts give his birth date as 1930, making the outfielder thirty-two rather than thirty when he enjoyed his first Major League Baseball season in 1962, with the Houston Colt .45s), in Las Villas, Cuba, where he was working in a sugarcane field in 1953 when signed to a Major League contract by Hall of Famer George Sisler, who was serving as a scout for the Pittsburgh Pirates. (12) Mejias continued to play winter ball in Cuba through the 1960 season, establishing himself as a star of Cuban baseball. However, the diplomatic and economic pressures of the evolving Cold War confrontation between the United States and Fidel Castro led Mejias, in 1961, to become separated from his family in Cuba. While unable to bring his family to the United States, Mejias did embody for Americans the best of Cuban baseball, described by Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria as "conservative, highly strategic," relying upon the "inside" baseball game of bunting and "slapping a grounder past a charging infielder." (13)

Mejias attained considerable success in the Pirates' Minor League chain. In 1954, the Cuban-born outfielder hit in 54 straight games, finishing with a batting average of .354 for Waco of the class-B Big State League. These Minor League credentials led to Mejias spending portions of the 1955 and 1956-61 baseball seasons with the Pirates. But he was never able to crack the starting Pittsburgh outfield of Bob Skinner, Bill Virdon, and Roberto Clemente, although Mejias did club 3 home runs in one game at San Francisco during the 1958 season. The next day, however, he was back on the Pittsburgh bench. Mejias's big baseball break had seemingly arrived when he was plucked from the Pirates for \$75,000 by the Houston Colt .45S in the 1962 expansion player draft.

However, this brief survey of Mejias's career in the Pittsburgh Minor League farm chain hardly does justice to the racial and cultural obstacles confronting the gifted, young athlete. First, Mejias was classified as a "Cuban Negro," enduring the racial taunts black ballplayers were continuing to receive in Minor League ballparks of the American Southwest and South. (14) As Peter C. Bjarkman notes in his history of Latin American baseball, "Dark-skinned Caribbean ballplayers were noteworthy during the 1950s and only become commonplace in the 1980s and 1990s" (15) In addition to the issue of race, the Spanish-speaking Mejias was confronted with the English language barrier. Southern segregation forced dark-skinned Latin players to live apart from the rest of the team, and Mejias arrived in the United States unable to speak a word of English. He later recalled:

I never expect' to be so lonely in the U.S. I couldn't eat.... I thought I would have to go back to Cuba for food. Finally, we learn to go into eating place and we go back in kitchen and point with fingers--thees, thees, thees [sic]. After while, somebody teach me to say ham and eggs and fried chicken, and I eat that for a long time. (16)

Mejias's fears that he would not be able to eat in the United States corresponds well with Samuel O. Regalado's characterization of Latin Major League ballplayers as having a special hunger. According to Regalado, competition on America's baseball diamonds carried crucial social and economic implications for Latin players:

Baseball was a path out of poverty it helped to bring distinction to their homelands; it was a means to ease the pain and suffering of kinfolk and compatriots; and it provided a sliver of hope to many younger Latins who might otherwise have envisioned a dim future. Their determination to succeed in the face of an unwelcoming culture reveals the human spirit of Latin players. For they, unlike so many other newcomers, faced these barriers alone, without the aid of support groups. And it was this willingness to break through cultural roadblocks that made their hunger "special." (17)

#### FLEDGLING

When the fledgling Colt .45S drafted Mejias and awarded him the starting right-field position, the native Cuban was determined to cash in on his opportunity. During spring training, Mejias's slugging carried the Houston franchise to the championship of the Arizona Cactus League. Mejias completed the spring with 5 home runs and 17

runs batted in. And the Houston power hitter continued his onslaught against big league pitching by clubbing 2 three-run home runs in support of former Yankee pitcher and American League Most Valuable Player Bobby Shantz's 11-2 opening day win against the Chicago Cubs in Colt Stadium. The Houston Chronicle described the Mejias home runs as a "double-barreled salute" to the introduction of Major League Baseball "in the land of the Alamo." Any irony that this shot was fired by a Latin ballplayer was lost upon Chronicle sports editor Dick Peebles, who focused upon Shantz's contribution to the opening day victory. Nevertheless, Peebles did not entirely ignore Mejias, commenting that if t he outfielder kept up the pace of opening day, he would hit 324 home runs. The editor, in a rather stereotypical fashion, noted that Mejias's response to the ridiculous prediction was a "toothy-grin." (18)

Stereotyping aside, Houstonians celebrated their newfound hitting star and a 3-game sweep of the Cubs to begin their inaugural campaign. However, behind these accolades, there were troubling signs that Houston management and many of their fans were not prepared to embrace Latins and racial tolerance into the Texas fold. Mejias was the only Latin player on the team, while Jim Pendleton, also drafted from the Pirates organization, was the team's sole African American player until shortstop J. C. Hartman was recalled from the minors at midseason. Unlike Mejias, Pendleton got off to a slow start at the plate in 1962 and was the object of fan abuse, which included racial slurs. A taciturn Pendleton attempted to minimize the taunts, insisting, "I turn a deaf ear, that's the best way." (19)

Sensitivity to Mejias's Cuban heritage was certainly lacking in a featured Houston Chronicle article on Colt .45s pitching coach Cot Deal's exploits in Cuba as the Batista regime was falling to the revolution led by Fidel Castro. According to Deal's account, a July 1959 game between the Rochester Red Wings, whom the Houston coach was managing at the time, and the Havana Sugar Kings was marred by soldiers firing bullets into the air in support of their "bearded leader." The game was suspended when Rochester's player-coach Frank Verdi and Havana's shortstop Leo Cardenas were wounded by stray bullets. Deal observed that he was lucky, for he had been ejected from the game for disputing an umpire's decision and was in the clubhouse when the shooting commenced. Demonstrating a lack of cultural and historical understanding, Deal attributed the violence to the "emotional Latin temperament." Engaging in cultural stereotypes, which would long plague Latin players in the United States, the Houston coach described the C uban baseball fan as governed by unchecked emotion: "When his team loses he sulks the long day through. When it wins, he's the happiest fella. (20) It apparently never occurred to Deal and the Houston press that their Cuban-born right fielder might find such racial commentary offensive.

Cuban pitcher Manuel Montejo, who was attempting to win a spot on the Colts staff after being obtained in a trade with the Detroit Tigers organization, was also the object of stereotyping by the Houston management and press. Manager Harry Craft thought the Cuban might help the club if he could control his temper. On the other hand, Zarko Franks of the Chronicle emphasized the pitcher's enthusiasm and poked fun at continuing language difficulties, writing, "The Cuban tiger and English harmonize like the calico dog and the gingham cat. Let's just say that Senor Montejo hacks his way through the word jungle after four years in this country." (21) However, when the Colts broke their spring training camp in Apache Junction, Arizona, Montejo was returned to the Minor Leagues, leaving Mejias as the only Latin on the Major League roster.

This lack of sensitivity to Cubans was also carried over into the Houston management's negligence in cultivating the local Latin market of Mexican Americans as well as that of neighboring Mexico. Certainly, the Houston franchise was not unaware of the importance of marketing, for the club had hired Mrs. Ginna Pace as a publicist to lure female fans to Colt Stadium. Writing for the Sporting News, and reflecting the gender-biased journalism of the time period, Clark Nealon described Pace as an "attractive, imaginative blonde with a journalistic background and rare enthusiasm for baseball," who would organize radio spots, fashion shows, and baseball clinics for female fans. Houston's executive vice president George Kirksey insisted that the club's success was dependent upon attracting families and mothers, observing, "Even our stadium was built to appeal to the women. The colors are turquoise, chartreuse, and Rio Grande orange, hues that would dress up a rainbow." (22)

However, marketing efforts at broadening the team's ethnic appeal seemed beyond the horizon of what Houston management perceived as an aggressive promotional and publicity strategy. For example, Colts vice president Kirksey estimated that if the club drew 1 million spectators, then approximately \$16 million would be generated for the Houston economy. Kirksey predicted that the Colts would draw support from Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Missing from the executive's equation was any consideration of Mexico as an economic base. In fact, officials expressed surprise that a survey of the stadium's parking lot included vehicles from Mexico. And when the Colts did reach out to Mexico with Spanish-language radio broadcasts and press tours to Monterey, the Houston Chronicle's Morris Frank resorted to racial caricature when he described the use of Spanish by approximately 200 "senors and senoras" from "good ole' Mexico." (23) The Houston baseball establishment seemed more comfortable perpetuating the western myth of the cowboy conquering the savage frontier, for the Colts were required to don western-style outfits featuring wide-brimmed Texas hats, bright blue suits, orange accessories, and boots for traveling. (24)

However, symbols of western mythology extolling the Anglo taming of the frontier and lack of appreciation for

Latin culture by the Colts establishment had little impact upon Mejias, who continued to wreak havoc upon National League pitchers during the early months of the 1962 season. By May 7, Mejias had homered seven times and was being touted by the press as Houston's answer to such National League sluggers as the San Francisco Giants' Willie Mays and Orlando Cepeda. And even these hitting stars were shut down on May 11 by the Colts' Dick "Turk" Farrell, who was emerging as the team's pitching leader and a challenger to Mejias's stature as Houston's most outstanding player. (25)

Meanwhile, the Colts right fielder continued to dominate senior circuit pitching, entering June with 11 home runs and leading the team in hits, runs batted in, runs, and batting average (.297). Mejias was achieving these power figures in a home ballpark whose dimensions were less than conducive to the home run. The Colt .45S played in a temporary structure, Colt Stadium, with a seating capacity of 32,000 and located on the same lot as the projected Harris County domed stadium. The playing dimensions of Colt Stadium were cavernous, with 360 feet down the foul lines, 420 feet in center, and 395 feet in the left and right power alleys. In jest, the Sporting News reported, "Our scouts tell us that Colt Stadium extends from the Pecos on the west to the Sabine on the east, and from the Red River on the north to the Gulf of Mexico on the south. The Gulf side is the comparatively short fence because even Texas peters out in this southerly direction." (26)

## ACCOLADES

With 7 out of Mejias's first 11 home runs coming in Colt Stadium, accolades were forthcoming for the Cuban outfielder, although media perceptions of Mejias were still framed through the lens of ethnicity. Regalado's perception of the special hunger of Latin players was also evident in press accounts of Mejias's meteoric rise in the 1962 season, although many of these stories developed the metaphor of hunger on a quite literal level. Referring to Mejias's language difficulties in being able to order food during his early days in the United States, reporter Mickey Herskowitz wrote in the Sporting News that the outfielder, who had a bit of the "gaucho" in him, had emerged as "Houston's ham, eggs, bread, butter, milk, and poultry man." (27) But in reality, Mejias was not necessarily in a position to be purchasing too many heavy-cholesterol breakfast foods. In a player profile for the Houston Chronicle, Zarko Franks reported that the "handsome Cuban" was earning only \$12,500 annually, and the team's Most Valuable Player was far from being the highest-paid Colt .45. And in the era of the strict reserve clause and weak players' union, Mejias could hardly expect any midseason correction to his contract. Franks observed that Mejias was succeeding in Houston despite personal problems. His wife and two young children remained in Cuba, and Mejias expressed concern for their well-being, exclaiming, "There is not much food there, and I worry if they are eating properly." (28)

Despite salary and family concerns, Mejias remained the model minority, refusing to publicly complain about his problems. A sense of modesty, along with his prolific hitting, made Mejias a fan favorite in Houston. After having hit only 17 home runs in six part-time seasons with the Pirates, Mejias found it difficult to account for his newly discovered power. He told Franks, "I am more surprised than anyone else that I hit the long ball. In spring, I worked hard just to be patient and wait for the ball. I hit with my wrists and arms only. Before I was a line drive hitter. Not a home run hitter. The fences were a thousand miles away. Today, none of the fences are too far away. I think of the home run more because I know I can hit the ball far." In addition to his work ethic, Mejias attributed his success to clean living. Claiming that his only vice was an occasional Cuban cigar, the athlete maintained, "Even if you are strong, sometimes you can not do your work on the baseball field. So how can you hope to do it if you drink too much and don't sleep enough." (29)

While salary issues remained and Mejias was unsuccessful in getting his family out of Cuba, he continued to make the most out of his opportunity to play every day in Houston. By July 3, when National League All-Star rosters were announced, Cincinnati Reds manager Fred Hutchinson failed to select Mejias to the squad despite the fact that the Houston player was third in the National League in home runs with 19, while driving in 48 runs and hitting for a .311 batting average. The All-Star outfield for the National League, as elected by the players, included Tommy Davis of the Los Angeles Dodgers, Willie Mays of the San Francisco Giants, and Roberto Clemente of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Instead of Mejias, Hutchinson picked Dick Farrell as Houston's representative to the All-Star Team. Used as both a starter and a reliever, Farrell had a record of 5 wins and 8 losses, while saving 5 games, striking out 90 batters, and compiling an earned run average of 2.48. Despite his more than respectable marks for an expansion ball club, Farrell expressed dismay that he was picked over Mejias. On the other hand, Mejias refused to raise issues of racial discrimination in the selection process and, while disappointed by player balloting and Hutchinson's decision to tap the New York Mets' Richie Ashburn and the Phillies' Johnny Callison as reserve outfielders, stated, "How do you like dot [sic]? Well, nothing to do but jus' keep swinging." (30)

But Mejias did not keep swinging as effectively during the second half of the 1962 season. Slowed by nagging injuries and the adjustment of National League pitchers, Mejias's power numbers declined. Meanwhile, Farrell emerged as Houston's featured player. Born in the Boston suburb of Brookline in 1934 and the son of Irish immigrants, Farrell had already established a reputation for being a prankster and heavy drinker as a member of the Philadelphia Phillies' notorious Dalton Gang. His good ol' boy persona appeared a perfect match for a team whose identity was forged in the image of a gun taming the Texas frontier. In fact, Farrell may have taken this

image too literally. Farrell was rumored to have reported to the Colts spring training camp with a .22 caliber pistol, which he carried with him on the two-mile walk from the team's hotel to the training facilities at Geronimo Park. Along the way, he allegedly shot at beer bottles, rabbits, and rattlesnakes. When asked about his favorite targets, Farrell quipped, "Anything shootable that don't shoot back." Yet, to go along with his reputation as a character, Farrell had a good fastball and a strong competitive streak (which sometimes included use of the illegal spitball pitch). (31)

During the baseball dog days of July and August, the hard-throwing and partying Anglo, Farrell, became the darling of the Colts fans and media, while the slumping Latin, Mejias, received generally respectful but certainly reduced attention. Moving away from Latin stereotypes but keeping a Latin focus, the Houston Chronicle often referred to Mejias as "the noblest Roman of them all." This point is well documented by the Chronicle's coverage of a July 20 contest in which the Colts defeated the St. Louis Cardinals by a 4 to 3 margin. Mejias singled in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded and two out, propelling Houston from defeat to victory with one swing of the bat. Yet, newspaper coverage focused upon Farrell, who struck out 12 Cardinals in the complete game victory. According to Colts manager Harry Craft, Farrell's fastball was "hopping like bunny cottontail," and the right-hander's curve ball was "exploding." Interviewed after the game, Farrell exclaimed, "This is the biggest charge I ever got out of winning a game. When Mejias hit that single with the bases loaded in the ninth to win the game, I didn't know who to hug. I was so happy." A logical choice for embracing would have been Mejias, yet in the postgame comments of Craft, as reported by the Chronicle, there was no mention of the Cuban player. The newspaper account of the game also omitted any interview with the game's hitting star. (32)

## RESPECTABLE

Talk of the Colts finishing in the first division and Mejias attaining 30 to 40 home runs faded in the hot Texas sun of August and September, but the club and its Latin star completed the season with respectable numbers. While many baseball people had predicted a last-place finish for the Colts, the team finished in eighth place, completing the season with a record of 64 wins and 96 defeats. While completing the season 36 games out of first and 16 out of seventh place, the Colts were 6 games ahead of the ninth-place Chicago Cubs and 24 wins in front of their expansion team rivals, the New York Mets, who had compiled a record of just 40 wins against 120 losses. The Colts finished sixth in National League attendance, drawing 924,456 fans and falling just short of their goal of 1 million, which had been negated by a team tailspin in July and August along with the humid Houston climate. The Colts had defeated the Mets in the attendance battle as well, outdrawing the New York club by 1,926 spectators. Vice President Kirksey summed up the year, "Most of our objectives were realized. We did not lose 100 games or finish last. We licked our expansion twin, the Mets, and outdrew them at the box office. We have a foundation to build on, and by blending upcoming players in with the 1962 team, we should begin the long, hard climb up the National League ladder." (33)

But would the club's first Latin star, Roman Mejias, be part of management's elusive plan to climb the National League ladder and claim a pennant? Manager Harry Craft announced that any Houston player, including Turk Farrell, was expendable in an off-season deal if the transaction would improve the team's prospects. The Colts planned to build around such prospects as twenty-four-year-old third baseman Bob Aspromonte. And when the Chronicle's sports editor, Dick Peebles, compiled a review of Colts highlights for the inaugural campaign, the contributions of Roman Mejias were conspicuously missing. (34) While Mejias led the Colts in home runs (24), runs batted in (76), and batting average (.286), nagging injuries had contributed to a late-season slump, and he hit only 6 home runs during July, August, and September.

Thus, it was not a total surprise when Mejias was traded after the 1962 season. But the transaction was hardly part of a youth movement by Houston management. Mejias was dealt to the Boston Red Sox, where the right-handed hitter could take advantage of Fenway Park's inviting Green Monster in left field, in exchange for American League batting champion Pete Runnels. While Mejias was either thirty or thirty-two, depending upon which birthday one chose to count, there was no doubt as to Runnels's rather advanced baseball age of thirty-five. Also, Runnels had little to offer in terms of speed and power, hitting only 10 home runs and driving in 61 runs for the 1962 campaign. So why did Houston make the trade? Marketing may be part of the answer. While Houston executives apparently saw little potential in exploiting the Mexican American market in Texas by signing talent from the Mexican League or celebrating a Spanish-speaking star such as Mejias, they were very interested in acquiring Runnels, who was a native of Lufkin, Texas, and resided in the Houston suburb of Pasadena. According to Houston sportswriter Clark Nealon, who filed a piece for the Sporting News on the trade, "Acquisition of Runnels ended a two year Colt effort to land the batting star who starred in Southeast Texas as a football and basketball standout at Lufkin High, left Rice University to seek a baseball career and now is the top sports resident of suburban Pasadena." (35)

In his history of the Houston Colts, Robert Reed illustrates the role played by racial stereotypes in the controversial trade, arguing that Houston general manager Paul Richards was convinced that the "affable Cuban" was thirty-nine years old rather than the official thirty. But the transaction was risky because Mejias had "become somewhat of a fan favorite for his happy-go-lucky nature and occasionally unintentionally humorous turn of a

phrase." Writing in 1999, Reed, whose training is in journalism, seemed to have no problem with perpetuating the image of the smiling, but somewhat lackadaisical, Latin ballplayer. (36)

As for Mejias, he was wished the best of luck by his former manager, Craft, who insisted, "He is a fine competitor. He carried us for the first two months of the season.... There were two reasons for his slump. He had played winter ball and started to run out of gas. Then he got hurt, missed a couple of weeks and when he got back into the lineup he couldn't generate the steam he had before." (37) However, Craft failed to mention Mejias's growing concerns regarding his family in Cuba. Distractions regarding the fourteen-month separation from his wife and two children weighing upon the Cuban's performance appeared to be of little concern to Houston management. On the other hand, following the acquisition of Mejias, Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey instructed his front office to spare no expense in laboring for the reunion of the ballplayer with his family. Red Sox management worked with the State Department and the Red Cross to, in the overwrought Cold War rhetoric of reporter Hy Hurwitz, "ransom the outfielder's brood from the clutches of Castroism." Accordingly, on the evening of March 16, 1963, Roman Mejias's spring training in Phoenix was interrupted with the arrival of his wife, Nicholosa; their twelve-year-old daughter, Rafaela, and ten-year-old son, Jose; and the athlete's sisters, Esperosa and Santa. Following this joyous reunion, Mejias expressed his appreciation for the Red Sox organization, exclaiming, "Now, I don't have to worry any more, and I can't thank the Red Sox enough. I want to do everything possible for the Red Sox, and I hope very soon I'll be helping them win the pennant." (38)

#### FENWAY VICTIM

However, baseball reality failed to mirror the happiness of the Mejias family reunion. For, like so many before and after him, Mejias was unable to help the Red Sox win a pennant and World Series. By August 1963, Mejias was hitting an anemic .233, with only 9 home runs and 31 runs driven in, and sitting on the Boston bench. While Mejias may have placed too much pressure on himself to show his appreciation for the Red Sox, George Vecsey argued that Mejias was another victim of Fenway Park's fabled Green Monster. Only 315 feet from home plate, Fenway's left-field wall is 37 feet high and represents a cozy target for powerful right-handed batters. Mejias assured the Red Sox organization that he "could hit it every time." But like many before him, in his eagerness to reach the Green Monster, Mejias was trying to pull every outside pitch to left, hitting pop-ups and weak ground balls to shortstop. While pledging to amend his aggressive style and "just try to go with the pitch," Mejias was never able to regain the glory days of his 1962 campaign with the Houston Colts. (39)

After completing the 1963 season with 11 home runs, Mejias's marks declined even more during his second season in Boston, with a batting average of .238, 2 home runs, and 4 runs driven in. Although he continued to play Minor League ball for several more seasons, Mejias's Major League baseball career was over. He had slugged 24 of his 54 Major League home runs during his 1962 season in the sun with the Houston Colts. However, the Cuban outfielder might take solace from the fact that Pete Runnels's return to his native Texas did little for his career. In 1963, Runnels was only able to hit for a .253 average with 2 home runs. After beginning the 1964 campaign with a .196 batting mark, Runnels retired from the game. (40)

What conclusions may one draw from this examination of Roman Mejias and the Houston Colt .45s during the 1962 season? The way Mejias was handled by the Houston management and media did little to alleviate the longstanding animosity and distrust between Anglo and Mexican in Texas. While Mejias was a Cuban of African ancestry, there was little recognition by the Houston baseball establishment regarding the potential of a Latin market that might have been reached by publicizing the exploits of the club's first Spanish-speaking power hitter. Instead, the Cuban's struggles with the English language were often a topic of amusement for the Houston press. In this regard, perhaps Houston was reflective of organized baseball in general. For example, in a November 3, 1962, editorial, the Sporting News called for Latin ballplayers to refrain from playing winter ball in Latin America and, instead, spend the time learning English. The paper concluded that even though many Hispanic players "have spent several summers in this country, some of them still barely speak the language. As a result, there is a widespread tendency in baseball to blame the so-called 'language barrier' for collisions and other misplays."

In any language, Mejias carried the Houston ball club for the first half of the 1962 season, but as he was slowed by injuries and worries while being snubbed by the All-Star selection process, the Houston baseball establishment focused its attention upon such Anglo stars as Dick Farrell and Bob Aspromonte. Mejias's long separation from his family appeared to be of little concern to Houston management, for the Red Sox were able to arrange a Mejias family reunion within four months. Mejias's thanks for his stellar contributions to the inaugural campaign of Major League Baseball in Houston was to be traded for an aging Anglo, a native Texan. The story of Roman Mejias's 1962 season in Houston tends to reinforce the legacy of racial exploitation and suspicion in the Lone Star State. Over the years, the Houston baseball establishment has done little to alleviate this sense of mistrust, organizing and marketing the team around such Anglo stars as Ryan, Biggio, and Bagwell, who despite their achievements have never been able to lead the Houston franchise to a National League pennant. It is within this historical context that the rush to judgment by many within the Hispanic community regarding allegations of racism against Astros owner Drayton McLane must be understood.

Ron Briley is the assistant headmaster at Sandia Prep. School in Albuquerque. His work has often appeared in NINE. During the summer of 2000, he participated in the organized cheering at a couple of baseball games in the Tokyo Dome.

## NOTES

(1.) For an account of the controversy between Drayton McLane and representatives from KTMD-TV, see New York Times, July 13, 1999.

(2.) Carey McWilliams, updated by Matt S. Meier, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1998), p. 112.

(3.) Rudolfo Acuna, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), pp. 40-41.

(4.) Jose Angel Gutierrez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant: Lessons from Cristal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp. 16-17.

(5.) David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987). For more on race relations in Texas between Mexican Americans and Anglos, see Armando Navarro, *The Cristal Experiment: A Chicano Struggle for Community Control* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), in addition to the works of McWilliams, Acuna, Gutierrez, and Montejano cited above.

(6.) Susan Gonzalez Baker, "Demographic Trends in the Chicano/a Population: Policy Implications for the Twenty-First Century," in David R. Maciel and Isidro D. Ortiz, *Chicanos/Chicanas at the Crossroads: Social, Economic, and Political Change* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), pp. 6-23.

(7.) For the history of Houston, see Don E. Canton, *Red Scare: Right- Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985); George Fuermann, *Houston: The Once and Future City* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1971); and David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

(8.) McComb, *Houston*, p. 192.

(9.) Francisco A. Rosales and Barry J. Kaplan, eds., *Houston: A Twentieth Century Urban Frontier* (Port Washington NY: Associated Faculty Press, 1983), p. 3.

(10.) For the efforts to bring Major League Baseball to Houston, see Clark Nealon, Robert Nottebart, Stanley Siegel, and James Tinsley, "The Campaign for Major League Baseball in Houston," *Houston Review* 7 (1985): pp. 3-46; Ron Briley, "The Houston Colt .45s: The Other Expansion Team of 1962," *East Texas Historical Journal* 27 (1994): pp. 59-74; and Robert Reed, *A Six-Gun Salute: An Illustrated History of the Houston Colt .45s* (Houston: Lone Star Books, 1999). For the New Western history, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987); and Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own," in *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

(11.) Many thought the Houston Astros (who replaced the Colt .45s logo following the 1964 season) had found their Latin star with Cesar Cedeno. However, after a December 1973 incident in which a young woman in the Dominican Republic was killed while allegedly playing with Cedeno's gun, the young player never reached his early potential, and, in 1981, the Astros traded Cedeno to the Cincinnati Reds.

(12.) For biographical sketches of Roman Mejias, see Larry Moffi and Jonathan Kronstadt, *Crossing the Line: Black Major Leaguers, 1947-1959* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 1994), pp. 138-39; and Roman Mejias File, Baseball Hall of Fame Museum and Library, Cooperstown, New York.

(13.) Roberto Gonzalez Bchevarria, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 7. For Mejias's career in Cuban baseball, see Echevarria, *Pride of Havana*, pp. 319, 323, 328, 330, and 342.

(14.) For issues of segregation in Minor League Baseball, see Bruce Adelson, *Brushing Back Jim Crow: The Integration of Minor-League Baseball in the American South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).

(15.) Peter C. Bjarkman, *Baseball with a Latin Beat: A History of the Latin American Game* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 1994), p. 6. For other works on Latin American baseball, see Alan M. Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game and the Dominican Dream* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1991); and Rob Ruck, *The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic* (Westport CT: Meckler, 1991).

- (16.) Mickey Herskowitz, ".45s Charge Puny Attack with Missile Man Mejias," *Sporting News*, June 2, 1962, clipping from Roman Mejias File, Baseball Hall of Fame Museum and Library, Cooperstown, New York.
- (17.) Samuel O. Regalado, *Viva Baseball: Latin Major Leaguers and Their Special Hunger* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. xiv.
- (18.) *Sporting News*, April 18, 1962, clipping from Roman Mejias File, Baseball Hall of Fame Museum and Library, Cooperstown, New York; and *Houston Chronicle*, April 11, 1962.
- (19.) *Houston Chronicle*, April 15, 1962. For additional background information on Jim Pendleton, see Moffi and Kronstadt, *Crossing the Line*, pp. 99-100; and William B. Furlong, "A Negro Ballplayer's Life Today," *Sport* 33 (May 1962): pp. 38-39.
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- (22.) Clark Nealon, "Colts Will Lasso Gal Fans--Hire Woman Publicist," *Sporting News*, April 4, 1962.
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- (24.) For the Colt .45s' traveling western outfits and player complaints regarding the outlandish costumes, see *Sporting News*, May 23, 1962; and *Houston Chronicle*, June 1, 2, 3, and 4, 1962.
- (25.) *Houston Chronicle*, May 7 and 12, 1962.
- (26.) For Colt Stadium, see *Sporting News*, January 10 and February 21, 1962; and *Houston Chronicle*, January 11 and 25, 1962.
- (27.) Herskowitz, ".45s Charge Puny Attack."
- (28.) Zarko Franks, "Mejias' Season of Milk, Honey?" *Houston Chronicle*, May 30, 1962.
- (29.) Franks, "Mejias' Season."
- (30.) *Houston Chronicle*, June 30, 1962; *Sporting News*, July 14, 1962; and Reed, *A Six-Gun Salute*, pp. 112-13.
- (31.) For background information on Dick Farrell, see Clark Nealon, "Farrell Rated Double-Barreled Dilly by .45s," *Sporting News*, November 3, 1962; and Reed, *A Six-Gun Salute*, pp. 126-36.
- (32.) *Houston Chronicle*, July 21, 1962.
- (33.) *Sporting News*, October 13, 1962; and *Houston Chronicle*, October 1 and 4, 1962.
- (34.) *Houston Chronicle*, August 28 and September 24, 1962.
- (35.) For the Mejias and Runnels trade, see *New York Times*, November 26, 1962, clipping from Roman Mejias File, Baseball Hall of Fame Museum and Library, Cooperstown, New York; and *Sporting News*, December 8, 1962.
- (36.) Reed, *A Six-Gun Salute*, p. 140.
- (37.) *Sporting News*, March 3, 1963, clipping from Roman Mejias File, Baseball Hall of Fame Museum and Library, Cooperstown, New York.
- (38.) Hy Hurwitz, "Red Sox Worked to Rescue Mejias' Family From Cuba," *Sporting News*, March 30, 1963, clipping from Roman Mejias File, Baseball Hall of Fame Museum and Library, Cooperstown, New York.
- (39.) George Vecsey, "Boston's 'Dream' Wall is Really a Nightmare," July 13, 1963, clipping from Roman Mejias File, Baseball Hall of Fame Museum and Library, Cooperstown, New York.
- (40.) Baseball statistics from John Thorne and Pete Palmer, eds., *Total Baseball: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Baseball* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).
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