

A Struggle Belongs to the People: El Rio's Story

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In the 1960s, minority groups across the United States demanded equal treatment and better opportunities for themselves and their families. Mexican Americans were instrumental in the struggle for civil rights across Sunbelt cities like Albuquerque, Los Angeles, and Tucson. In Tucson, a protest for El Rio Park on the Santa Cruz River was one part of the local Chicano/a movement. Inspired by a burgeoning sense of Chicano/a heritage that took diverse forms throughout the southwest the El Rio protests were a grassroots movement that embodied the Chicano Civil Rights movement in Tucson.

In organizing political Mexican-Americans had to overcome divisions within their own groups over how best to earn more rights for themselves. Many Mexican-Americans adopted and developed the identity of Chicano/a in their civil rights struggle. Chicano/a identity has a nebulous meaning, but it merges identities into something Mexican Americans could relate to and draw political strength from. Initially, Chicano was "... a term of ethnic identification and not meant in any way to demean. More recently, however, Chicano has been used... to identify more with Mexican-Indian culture than with the Mexican-Spanish culture."¹

An interview with one Chicano writer expanded on this arguing that Chicano, "closely fit our identity - our present identity [...] embodied [...] was a sense of pride, a sense of revolution [...] that we had to create our own destiny."² Chicano/a identity formed an acknowledgement of a Mexican American's heritage, derived from shared Hispanic and Native American roots along with a close tie to the land. Other political identities that Mexican Americans utilized, such as *La Raza*, or the people, and identifying with Mesoamerican and North American Indigenous iconography.

It is important to remember that history belongs to the voices en masse as much as it does to great figures lifted by them. The conflict over El Rio persisted throughout the area across four years. Sources documenting the protests include the photos of Jack Sheaffer, newspaper

¹ Edward R. Simmen and Richard F. Bauerle, "Chicano: Origin and Meaning," *American Speech* 44 (Autumn 1969): 226.

² Rudolfo Anaya and R.S. Sharma, "Interview with Rudolfo Anaya," *Prairie Schooner* 68 (Winter 1994): 177. Anaya meticulously explains Chicano culture, literature, and the arts and its impact on the Chicano Movement. He dates the movement's birth in the mid 1960's, around the time of the El Rio Protests. The Chicano return to Mexican Art can be plainly seen in the public art in the El Rio Neighborhood Center.

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clippings from the *Arizona Daily Star* and the *Tucson Citizen*, murals made after the protests, and the actions of the activists. It is because of photos, newspapers, murals, and the work of activists which made El Rio an enduring if under-publicized piece interwoven into a greater Civil Rights mosaic. To get an understanding of El Rio one must get a feel for Tucson, the political events, and the first interactions between the city council and the people of the barrios during 1967, the year the movement began.

El Rio Park and its Neighborhood Center are located on the Westside of the Santa Cruz River. Across from the park to the south sits Barrio Hollywood while Barrio Sovaco is slightly northeast of the park where the Santa Cruz River curves westward. These barrios, including Barrios such as Anita east across the Santa Cruz River were the closest to El Rio Park. Before the park's acquisition residents were relegated to smaller and less maintained parks. The acreage of the barrio parks like Menlo, Oury, or Estevan which averaged between seven and three acres, were small compared the 122 acres of El Rio.³ Although there were larger facilities like Mansfield or Santa Rita Park, they were too far north or south from Barrios Hollywood, Sovaco, or Anita who were advocating for El Rio. The neighborhood center near Santa Rosa Park was like the other parks too far south from the barrios.⁴ There were a multitude of parks, but, "... the quality desirable in a park is missing because most of these sites are too small, and they do not have the facilities which would make them anywhere near a full-service park."⁵

The size and quality of El Rio Park in comparison to the parks reserved for Chicanos was another black mark that united the barrios around acquiring the park for public use. An often-cited grievance expressed by barrio residents from Hollywood or Sovaco was how their own parks appeared to reinforce their second-class status. The majority Chicano population had to take their children to other parks that were not nearly as well kept. These parks inconvenienced the people because of a particular park's distance but also because of neglect and age. Take for instance Oury or Menlo Park. Oury was reported as having the oldest

³ *El Rio Fight Focuses Attention on Condition of Parks in Area* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

⁴ *Condition of Parks Spotlighted* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

⁵ *Condition of Parks Spotlighted* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

park buildings but was outdated and obsolete.⁶ Menlo lacked the facilities for a neighborhood center. Size and scale was also a factor. A map of the Westside shows the locations of the barrios and their parks. Something readers will realize looking at the map would be how small all of the other parks like Menlo or Oury are. Four Menlo parks could fit inside El Rio but Menlo was still larger than the other parks like Oury or Estevan.⁷ Every other park however is miniscule when compared to El Rio. It was distressing for parents walking their children from any of these parks while El Rio lay so close yet unattainable. It would continue to appear to be unattainable considering the stalemated pace of negotiations between the El Rio coalition and Tucson city council.

One of the major reasons for the El Rio movement's creation was related to the infrastructure or lack thereof that was typical of the barrios like Hollywood, Sovaco, and Anita. Coalition activist Salomon Baldenegro (and later University of Arizona assistant dean of Hispanic affairs) recalled how the barrios had unpaved streets, no sidewalk, and no park forcing the children to play in the streets.⁸ The absence of quality infrastructure in the neighborhoods was a major reason for the first petition asking the city council for a park. The unpaved streets and no sidewalk were also holdovers of Tucson's urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the promises urbanization would bring such as highways and modern buildings the urbanization of Tucson quickly began to favor Anglo-Americans at the expense of the minorities in the city. As new suburbs were being built it became clear that the newer, Anglo-American neighborhoods of Tucson began to surpass the barrios in size and quality.⁹ Much of the space reserved for those neighborhoods were the barrios of Mexican-Americans who had to migrate to lower income parts of Tucson. The insufficient streets may be symptomatic of Tucson's barrios in the aftermath of Tucson's urbanization. Among the few Chicanos able to visit El Rio Park (caddies and restaurant workers) the lush beauty of El Rio Park expressed the discrepancy between their undeveloped neighborhoods and this park with green grass, ponds, and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gabriel Figueroa, *Map of Barrios of the Westside* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, 1997).

⁸ *Paper Helped Image of the El Rio Movement* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera Files, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

⁹ Juan Gomez-Novy and Stefanos Polyzoides, "A Tale of Two Cities: the Failed Urban Renewal of Downtown Tucson in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of the Southwest* 45 (Spring-Summer 2003): 92.

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trees.¹⁰ El Rio is especially close to Barrios Sovaco and Hollywood yet, Chicano/a families and their children had to settle for smaller parks like Menlo and Oury.

For the residents of barrios around El Rio the acquisition the golf course as a public park became a political and community issue. Standing against them were city council members, the police, and even newspapers. Institutions from the barrios, such as the El Rio coalition, and activists such as Salomon Baldenegro fought for the establishment of a park.¹¹ At its heart, the El Rio coalition was a grassroots organization. The coalition consisted of the barrios closest to El Rio Park, such as Hollywood, Sovaco, and Anita.¹² As the protests dragged on the coalition began to include professionals such as lawyers and architect advisors. Including speakers and council negotiators the coalition in 1970 is said to speak for, "... 13,000 West Siders."¹³

In 1967, mayoral candidate James Corbett led an election campaign where he canvassed and spoke in Westside neighborhoods such as Barrio Hollywood, Anita, and Sovaco for support. Westside leaders and activists tried to ally with Corbett, offering their support for Corbett and his fellow candidates for election to city council, in exchange for "... a piece of the El Rio Country Club and make it into a park".¹⁴ When the new city council members were elected The city councilmen reneged on their promise and acted as if no promise had been made.¹⁵ What followed afterwards were swift consensus from the barrios in the form of petitions gathered by activists Salomon Baldenegro, Jorge Lespron, and Frankie Wood. Jorge Lespron was an activist from the movement's beginning in 1967 and a University of Arizona senior in 1971.¹⁶ Lespron was featured alongside Baldengro in a picture from the

¹⁰ Encinas and Kelly, *Looking into the Westside: Untold Stories of the People 1900-1997*, 12.

¹¹ For more information on the work of Salomon Baldenegro see Salomon R. Baldenegro, *Chicano/Hispanic Plan of Action 1990-1991 University of Arizona* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990) and *Baldenegro's Firing at UA criticized as 'slap in the face'* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1998], *Clip Book-Baldenegro*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Archives and Library, Tucson.

¹² Gabriel Figueroa, *Map of Barrios of the Westside* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, 1997).

¹³ *El Rio Meetings End; Solution Seems To Be 50-Acre Park* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970] *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

¹⁴ Steve Encinas and Regina Kelly, *Looking into the Westside: Untold Stories of the People 1900-1997* (Tucson: Historical Society), 1997, 12.

¹⁵ Encinas and Kelly, *Looking into the Westside*, 12.

¹⁶ *Interior Secretary To Appear at El Rio* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1971], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks El Rio (1971-)*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

Tucson Daily Citizen September 4, 1969 when both were facing charges of trespassing from the police for entering El Rio Golf Course without paying greens fees.¹⁷ Frankie Wood was an activist from Barrio Hollywood who was present when the El Rio Coalition walked onto El Rio Park for the first time in August 1970. Wood joked before the takeover, “Why isn’t Mayor James Corbett here to address the people” and suggested they not support him in the November 1971 election.¹⁸ He was also arrested alongside Baldenegro in September 1970 regarding the outbreak of violence at El Rio Park on the fifth of September.¹⁹ They delivered the petition to the city council expressing the people’s demands. In Baldenegro, Lespron, and Wood’s wake were four hundred people who followed the three activists and the petition. This first petition, signed with over two thousand names was the El Rio movement in its infancy. It was also the first spontaneous act of the people to become involved through signing the petition and then following Baldenegro, Lespron, and Wood to city hall.²⁰

The first stages of the coalition involved petitions and back and forth negotiations with the Tucson city council. A common frustration among many El Rio activists in the coalition was the city council’s obstinacy to compromise. The situation was worsened with the council’s veiled attempts to shove the coalition’s demands to the back seat by delaying talks and compromises. The coalition had been offered smaller acre parks in August or been told it was financially impossible to turn El Rio from a private golf course into a public park.²¹ Delays also halted the coalition’s progress in making their demands known. An August 15, 1970 proposal from the city council included a 25-acre park and called for the construction of a multi-purpose building and the conversion of nine holes of the course into a park in four or five years.²² The wait time was unacceptable as was the reason for the delay. Construction and

¹⁷Encinas and Kelly, *Looking into the Westside*, 12.

¹⁸ 250 *Invade El Rio for Picnic, Tour* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks El Rio (1971-)*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

¹⁹ *Appeals Judge Suspends El Rio Violence Probe* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

²⁰ Encinas and Kelly, *Looking into the Westside*, 12.

²¹ *El Rio Coalition refused by City* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970] *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

²² *El Rio Coalition to Rally Today on Park Issue* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970] *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

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conversion would only take place once the mortgage balance on the park was lower. The wait for the conversion of all 18 holes was longer being eight to ten years. City council even had the audacity to suggest the coalition and the barrio residents to be content with a 25-acre park in the Manzo neighborhood. Delays and excuses continued to roll in as the city council seemed unwilling to compromise. The city council's initial proclamation that a covenant related to the El Rio golf course must remain an 18-hole golf course until the land is paid for, or until July 31, 1974.²³ Further deals from the city council continued attempts at keeping the golf course privatized while giving the coalition a slightly better deal each time. The coalition continued to insist on a substantial park that would be in El Rio. In the meantime, local newspapers were beginning to regularly narrate the coalition's struggle.

In the struggle for El Rio Park, local newspapers played a role in narrating the back and forth between the coalition and the city council, significant events, and latest developments. Although there were alternative means like television and radio to disseminate information by the 60s and 70s, the newspaper was and remains a tool for keeping the public informed. During the struggle for El Rio, newspapers became one of the battlegrounds with public opinion being a critical factor. The *Arizona Daily Star* and the *Tucson Daily Citizen* were specifically mentioned as being competitors with different stances. Salomon Baldenegro was particularly scathing of the *Arizona Daily Star* in an article from the *Tucson Citizen*. The *Arizona Daily Star* picked up the city council's mantra and blasted the movement repeatedly.²⁴ The *Tucson Daily Citizen* strove to deliver the coalition's side of the conflict. An *Arizona Daily Star* article criticized the ruckus over El Rio golf course as "an effort to organize persons of Mexican descent for an attack on some of the very institutions on which they should depend for support."²⁵ The reason for the El Rio protests, the article claims, came not from protester's grievances but needless ethnic tensions. The *Daily Star* mentioned other ethnic groups such as Chinese, Irish, and Scottish as a significant part of the Westside demographic. The *Tucson Citizen* took the opposite *Daily Star's* position. A *Tucson Citizen* article from September 11, 1970 criticized

²³ *El Rio Coalition refused by City*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

²⁴ *Paper Helped Image of the El Rio Movement*, Ephemera Files, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

²⁵ *Issue is not Ethnic* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera Files, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson. Depend is an interesting word as is the way it is being used. Is the writer subtly suggesting that Mexican Americans are dependents in need of support?

“the senseless and unyielding opposition to buy enough land to make a Westside regional park.”²⁶ The *Tucson Citizen* sided with the El Rio Coalition’s aims for better treatment and more recreational space for their children.²⁷ The *Citizen’s* support of the Coalition was centered around the reasoning that “Regional parks are needed on the east, north, and south sides of the city as well as on the west side... there is no better place to begin than by putting a big park in the low income El Rio area.”²⁸ The *Citizen* iterated that it will continue to cover El Rio Park and the coalition until the park is acquired for public use.

As the opposition developed, the Tucson city council served as a ground of conflict. The council tended to cite financial problems, offering less than what the El Rio coalition deemed desirable. Negotiations between the two groups were also one sided as each proposal made by the coalition was rejected. The rejections came so regularly that a member of the coalition stated “to our third, fourth, and fifth proposal, the city said no. The result is we come to the end of negotiations.”²⁹ The El Rio coalition’s proposals had been refused by the council since August 1970. As negotiations broke down the first reference came to, “... taking over the golf course that lies adjacent to the 10,000 homes of residents of the group represented.”³⁰ Prior to October 2, 1970 the El Rio coalition had been making the El Rio struggle public through demonstrations. Finding no common ground, the coalition continued their protests after October and did not return to the negotiating table until 1971. The coalition needed an event that would energize their cause and prove their proposal was legitimate. That came with the takeover of El Rio Park.

Faced with a stalemate in negotiations, the El Rio Coalition turned to demonstrating en masse on August 13. The high point of the El Rio Coalition was the August 15, 1970 takeover of El Rio Park.³¹ The takeover

²⁶ *Citizen Supports El Rio Area Park* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera Files, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

²⁷ *City, Chicanos Both in Wrong* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera Files, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson

²⁸ *Citizen Supports El Rio Area Park* [Tucson, Arizona].

²⁹ *El Rio Meetings End; Solution Seems To Be 50-Acre Park* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970] *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

³⁰ *El Rio Coalition Refused by City* [Tucson, Arizona].

³¹ *The Looking into the Westside: Untold Stories of the People 1900-1997* and the *250 Invade EL Rio for Picnic, Tour* stories disagree on who first prompted the people to step onto the park in the first place. For Encinas and Kelly it was Mrs. Rodriguez whereas the *Star* article attributes it to a few members who had edged onto the park.

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turned picnic started off as a rally which featured activists speaking to an enthusiastic crowd about their demands and goals. According to members of the El Rio Coalition the decision to set foot on the park was sparked when a few members of the crowd had edged onto the park then followed by others including many small children on bicycles.³² Previous public marches to the park often involved children. It was a reflection of one of the El Rio Coalition's goals to acquire the park for their children. A picture of the picnic tour captures the energy and excitement for many of the barrios Chicano parents and children walking onto the park. One of the golfers putters off with a smile while members of the crowd casually sauntered onto the premises, as though they had always been to the park.³³ As the protests wore on the El Rio protests began to utilize elements from Chicano activism. On some pictures of the protesters Spanish was prevalent on their signs or an element from Mexico, like the flag, was present. Golfers were frustrated at having their games (and sometimes their golf balls) taken over. Police stationed at the takeover initially stood by and only acted to prevent friction between demonstrators and the golfers. Such passivity from the police would not be common in future marches. Regardless, the coalition regained momentum in the El Rio Protests. The takeover of El Rio Park renewed negotiations with the city council and inspired future marches.³⁴

After the momentous takeover of El Rio additional protests and marches were held near the park. Unlike the picnic tour of El Rio Park, police were not content to be mere bystanders and became active antagonists against the protestors. On one occasion on September 19, 1970, seven demonstrators were arrested for various reasons that ranged from obstruction of justice to trespassing. Protestors claimed that the traffic stops were harassment and that patrolmen were selectively enforcing the law.³⁵ Other drivers had been openly violating the law but not stopped. A telling picture of police brutality is seen in a photo where one woman activist was being arrested for interfering with police giving a traffic violation. The picture shows her and another man struggling with officers. Her arms are being forcibly twisted behind her back and both the

³² 250 *Inovade El Rio for Picnic, Tour* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks El Rio (1971-)*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

³³ Jack Sheaffer, *Protestors begin their march led by the El Rio Coalition*, 40426.68, The Jack Sheaffer Photograph Collection, MS 435, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson.

³⁴ Encinas and Kelly, *Looking into the Westside*, 13.

³⁵ *Seven Protestors at El Rio Seized* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks El Rio (1971-)*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

officer and activist appear to be straining against each other's strength.³⁶ Also arrested were Salomon Baldenegro, his brother, and his wife. Violence wasn't just limited to the police. Between the *Citizen* and the *Daily Star* both had reported on violence against police by protestors. On September 5 militant demonstrators picketed and threw stones at patrol cars and the September 19 arrests where 50 to 75 demonstrators surrounded a patrol car, spitting into the car and screaming obscenities.³⁷ These clashes followed in the wake of the negotiations between city council and the El Rio coalition. The struggle between civilians and police also included tense standoffs between armed police and demonstrators. A Baldenegro-led night march along the south and east sides of the park chanting "power" and "Raza si, pigs no."³⁸ The demonstrators carried candles while the police inside the park appeared ready for a siege, equipped with riot sticks and one shotgun. It is a stark contrast between the protestors who on earlier occasions had brought their children riding on their parent's shoulders or in their arms during a day march and would never see hostility from the police.³⁹ The armed police and clashes with protestors were contrary to the peaceful El Rio Park Picnic of August 15, 1970 where the police stood by while the "invaders" walked upon the park, the first time for many in the community. Even with such a significant step the park still seemed out of reach especially with the opposition of police and Tucson city council. If 1970 proved to be a difficult year for the coalition then 1971 would be the year where the coalition's fortunes turned for the better.

Throughout 1970 the barrio's residents and the El Rio coalition have marched and demonstrated around and on the fields of El Rio Park. The people also took the fight to city hall where protesters hung up banners and carried signs. Upon one banner would be a rallying cry of the coalition's cause as well as summing up the sentiment of the entire protest movement. Among the people hoisting signs boldly declaring

³⁶ Jack Sheaffer, *El Rio Protestors-Police arrest five persons*, 40653.5, The Jack Sheaffer Photograph Collection, MS 435, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson.

³⁷ Between *Golf is Expected to Stay* and *Seven Protestors at El Rio Seized* it is agreed upon by both the *Citizen* and *Daily Star* that the protests risked spiraling out of control. The *Citizen* noted on September 5 how unknown vandals caused \$6,000 in damage to the golf course while the *Daily Star* portrayed the arrest of Mrs. Fettner on the 19th of being police brutality as well as being just a random arrest. Other policemen behaved similarly, with one policeman tossing his riot stick at a fleeing man.

³⁸ *Trespassing laid to 5 at El Rio* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1970], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks El Rio (1971-)*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

³⁹ Sheaffer, *El Rio Protestors (Chicanos) March to El Rio from Tully School*, 40463.10, The Jack Sheaffer Photograph Collection, MS 435, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson.

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“turn over the park or we will” or “El Rio: people’s park too” was a banner stating, “El Rio belongs to the people.”⁴⁰ The phrase El Rio belongs to the people would be restated various times but there was always that link, between the park El Rio and the people living around it. Since the start of the protests in 1967, there had been an emphasis on making the park public and to end the restriction the park had towards the predominantly Chicano population of the Westside. The El Rio coalition would accomplish this task in 1971, when Tucson city council was true to its word and gifted the El Rio coalition a northwestern section of the park and an eastern section became the El Rio neighborhood center.⁴¹ Despite accomplishing their task the fight for El Rio did not end here. The coalition continued to push for more improvements and changes. Even after the park was “theirs” members such as Jorge Lespron of the El Rio coalition were quick to point out in August 3, 1971 that the park is west of the group’s target area, the meat of El Rio Park. The same problems the other barrio parks had remained prevalent in the newly acquired park where the distance itself prevents much attendance from Westside barrios.⁴² Demands for changes to the park persisted five years after the park was allegedly opened to the public. There were efforts made in 1976 from El Rio residents to remove a barbed wire fence around the park, but during the year the El Rio Coalition was ended. The dissolution of the El Rio coalition and the shifting attention of activists to other civil rights issues affecting Chicanos such as education.⁴³ Changes to the park transpired gradually through the efforts of the barrio residents. Gone though was the unifying entity of the El Rio Coalition. Preservation and improvement of the park would not have been the barrio people’s concern in 1967 or 1970. In 1971 and after it had now fallen to the people to see such improvements implemented for their children. Removing obstructions like the barbed wire that served as a reminder of Chicano exclusion from the park and integration of recreational improvements such as more shade to ward off the summer heat that reaches temperatures into the 90s and 100s became top priorities

⁴⁰ Jack Sheaffer, *El Rio Protestors Picket City Hall*, 40443B.21, The Jack Sheaffer Collection, MS 435, University of Arizona Special Collections, Tucson.

⁴¹ Encinas and Kelly, *Looking into the Westside*, 13.

⁴² *5 Week Old El Rio Park Short on Shade, Visitors* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1971], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

⁴³ For more information see *El Rio Area Residents Want Golf Course Fence Removed* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1976], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Barrios and Districts-El Rio*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson and an article by Adolfo Quezada from the same source. The title for Quezada’s article is mysteriously absent.

in the protests aftermath.⁴⁴ While additions such as the long fought for swimming pool became works in progress dissatisfaction with the park remained. The coalition had still made progress, moving from no park in the late 60s to a park early in the 70s. Growing involvement from Mexican American students ensured the relevance of the Chicano movement. Activist Adolfo Quezada affirmed the importance of the El Rio political project that it “was what must happen in order that we [Chicano/a organizers] do not become stagnant.”⁴⁵ Years after the protests; the benefits of the El Rio Coalition could finally be reaped.

The fruits of the El Rio protests are prevalent in the public art motifs around El Rio Park commemorating the protests. The El Rio neighborhood center is marked in everything related to Chicano/as or the El Rio protests. The walls near the parking lot exhibit a striking ceramic image of farmers working in the fields or planting. In the case of the farmers on the left, a man and woman plant the letters that spell out El Rio.⁴⁶ Adorning the front of the center is an impressive mural with depictions of Mesoamerican and Mexican heritage such as a step pyramid and the symbols of the Mexican flag.⁴⁷ Included are people in contemporary dress with the man on the right with his fist raised in the air. In the center’s courtyard lies an image of a winged woman holding a book titled *La Raza*. Above her head is another bird painted in a similar Mesoamerican style. Behind her head facing outward are two males and just above them is a bright blue sky. Part of the mural extends towards the rafters where a blazing sun is portrayed.⁴⁸ These are only two of the many images in the neighborhood center that emphasize El Rio’s importance to the Chicanos and Mexican Americans in the area. Like the first mural, *El Libro* is an example of how the people of the barrios had made El Rio their own while expressing their Mexican/Indian heritage. It also references terms synonymous with the Chicano movement. For instance, the words *La Raza* mean the race or people, a general term embodying culture, language, and heritage of Spanish speaking

⁴⁴ 5 *Week Old El Rio Park Short on Shade, Visitors* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1971], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Parks-El Rio-Through 1970*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson.

⁴⁵ Adolfo Quezada, *Arizona Daily Star* [Tucson, Arizona]: np, [1975], *Places-Arizona-Tucson-Barrios and Districts-El Rio*, Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society Library and Archives, Tucson

⁴⁶ El Rio Ceramic Wall. Personal Collection, Jordan Javier, Tucson, AZ.

⁴⁷ David E. Tineo, *title unknown*, El Rio Learning Center, 1390 W. Speedway Blvd, Tucson, Arizona.

⁴⁸ David E. Tineo, *El Libro y La Esperanza de Nuestra Raza*, El Rio Learning Center, 1390 W. Speedway Blvd, Tucson, Arizona.

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peoples.⁴⁹ The various step pyramids and Indian iconography drops hints to Aztlan, the land the Aztecs originated from. These themes are prevalent within and without the center in architecture and art. Being used in the context of El Rio and the Civil Rights struggle suggests the close relationship between race and politics. The use of these terms draws inspiration from the growth of the Chicano movements that emerged across the Southwest.

If El Rio Park today seems idyllic with people of all races golfing while children, teens, and adults entertain themselves in the center nearby it is because of the efforts people made decades ago. That does not mean the park is permanently free of struggle after it was acquired for public use. In 2013, a secret deal was discovered wherein Tucson's mayor and city council were trying to sell El Rio to a private developer, namely Grand Canyon University.⁵⁰ The discovery that officials have an interest in privatizing the park was a major reversal considering the original struggle for El Rio was to publicize a private park. The discovery created a storm of protest from people in Tucson and especially from the neighborhoods around it. Although the deal was terribly underhanded the public reaction showed that the spirit that drove the original El Rio protest persists. One of the responses came from Scott Egan, vice president of the Barrio Hollywood Neighborhood Association condemning the deal and proclaiming that golfers and non-golfers are united in opposition to the city.⁵¹ Not only is the speaker from one of the original barrios that made up the El Rio coalition, Barrio Hollywood, the Barrio Hollywood Neighborhood Association is the modern-day successor to the coalition. Those who spoke out against the deal are representatives of a large group of people who take up a common cause. It is much like the El Rio coalition which was formed from the people of the barrios. The ordinary people that made up the El Rio coalition or the Neighborhood Association can be described as a grassroots organization. El Rio remains something for people to rally to. Though the cause is no

⁴⁹ Renato Rosaldo et al, *Chicano: The Beginnings of Bronze Power* (New York: Morrow, 1974), 10

⁵⁰ For more details see these two articles, Patrick McKenna, "Neighborhood Leaders across Tucson unite against Sale of El Rio," *Three Sonorans*, May 26, 2013, <https://threesonorans.com/2013/05/26/neighborhood-leaders-across-tucson-unite-against-sale-of-el-rio/> and Patrick McKenna, "Busted: El Rio Golf Course appraised as "Vacant Land" in secret deal with GCU," *Three Sonorans*, September 21, 2013, <https://threesonorans.com/2013/09/21/bombshell-el-rio-golf-course-appraised-vacant-land-secret-deal-gcu/>

⁵¹ Patrick McKenna, "Neighborhood Leaders across Tucson unite against Sale of El Rio," *Three Sonorans*, May 26, 2013, <https://threesonorans.com/2013/05/26/neighborhood-leaders-across-tucson-unite-against-sale-of-el-rio/>

longer primarily Chicano or Mexican American both serve as impeccable examples of the power of the people taking the initiative and playing an active role in politics. It is a spirit to be admired and emulated in our increasingly politically aware society.

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