

SLEEPY LAGOON MURDER and the ZOOT SUIT RIOTS

On August 2, 1942, the murdered body of Jose Diaz was found at the Sleepy Lagoon reservoir in southeast Los Angeles. This event touched off months of media attention focusing on Mexican American boy gangs, their criminality, and the zoot suits they wore.

Investigating the murder, the Los Angeles police questioned 600 Chicano youths. Among those rounded up were Louis Encinas and his sister Lorena, who had attended a party that night near Sleepy Lagoon. Louis was questioned and released, while Lorena Encinas was arrested and jailed for not cooperating with authorities.

22 youths would be indicted on murder charges and placed on trial. *People v. Gus Zamora* became the largest mass trial in California history with 17 defendants. Three of the defendants were convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison, and nine defendants were convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced "five-to-life." The other five defendants were convicted of assault. Five additional defendants received separate trials and were all acquitted.

During World War II, Los Angeles became home to thousands of U.S. servicemen assigned to protect the Pacific coast. Many of these servicemen were stationed at The Naval Reserve Armory in Chavez Ravine.

Confrontations occurred between mostly white servicemen who spent their time on leave in Los Angeles drinking and the Pachucos, or Chicano youths, who dressed in the popular zoot suits of the time. Sailors from as far away as San Diego often provoked the confrontations by insulting Chicano boys and trying to date Chicano girls.

The tension between the two groups escalated until a street fight broke out in June 1943, sparking more than a week of fighting that became known as the Zoot Suit Riots. The Los Angeles police did not want to interfere with U.S. military servicemen and were unwilling to step in and protect civilians during the riots. They did, however, arrest dozens of young Mexican Americans for rioting. The rioting only ceased after senior military officials declared Los Angeles off limits to all sailors, soldiers, and marines. The following day the Los Angeles City Council adopted a resolution that banned the wearing of zoot suits on Los Angeles streets.

On October 2, 1944, the Second District Court of Appeals overturned all of the Sleepy Lagoon verdicts, and the case of People v. Gus Zamora was dismissed. All 17 defendants were released with their records cleared.

Officially, the murder of Jose Diaz remains unsolved. However, before her death in 1991, Lorena Encinas confided to her children that her late brother Louis was the one who beat and killed Jose Diaz that night during a party near the Sleepy Lagoon. She chose to serve time in jail herself rather than have her brother sent to San Quentin.