Background on Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles

During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), 1 million people emigrated from Mexico to the U.S Southwest. Tens of thousands more arrived in the 1920s. Combined with the descendants of Mexicans living in the Southwest before 1848, by the late 1930s there were about 3 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the country. Los Angeles had the largest Mexican-American community of any U.S. city.

• By the 1940s, Mexican-American urban youth had formed styles of speech and dress that were neither traditionally Mexican nor traditionally American.

• Zoot suits were a type of fashion worn by some urban youth and were popular among Mexican Americans. Some adults saw the flashiness of the zoot suits as excessive. Among white servicemen the suits were seen as even antagonistic and un-American.

• In the 1940s, Mexican Americans continued to face racial segregation in schooling, housing, movie theaters, restaurants, swimming pools, and more. They also faced severe discrimination in employment and by the criminal justice system.

• The Bracero Program, a program to import Mexican workers to fill the large agricultural labor shortage during WWII, began in 1942. The need to ensure an agricultural labor supply turned out to be the U.S. government’s main concern in responding to the Zoot Suit Riots.

• The majority of service men and women stationed in LA during the riots were white.

• The riots occurred 6 months after the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, a controversial case that involved Los Angeles police detaining 600 Mexican-American teenagers in response to finding one Mexican-American teenager dead and suspected to be murdered.

• The trial violated due process and was seen by many Mexican Americans as unjust. 22 Mexican-American teens were found guilty. The trial was overturned several years later, and all of the accused were released.

• Rioting occurred in May and June 1943 in Los Angeles. The June riots lasted several days in Los Angeles. Thousands of servicemen participated in the attacks in which they targeted Mexican-American youth with beatings and racial slurs and stripped them of their zoot suits. Some Filipino and African-American youth were also among those attacked.

• The police arrested more than 500 Mexican Americans. No servicemen were arrested. The incident set off a wave of attacks against Latinos/as in seven of the U.S. cities.