

NEWS

Old “Mexican School” in Marfa to be protected

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Former Blackwell School student Betty Nunez outside the school's only remaining building in Marfa.

Photo: Kin Man Hui /Staff photographer

MARFA — The rude initiation that greeted a very young Mario Rivera more than seven decades ago at the Blackwell School still lingers.

“I was in the first grade in this room. And I remember my teacher asking me in English to get my tablet. When I didn’t, she thought I wasn’t minding her, so she hit my hand three times with her ruler,” Rivera, 78, recalled during a recent visit to the old schoolhouse where Mexican American children were once educated.

“At that point, I didn’t know any English and she didn’t know any Spanish, or if she did, she wouldn’t use it,” he said.

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As Rivera and countless other Blackwell pupils learned, some with a painful paddling, mastery of English was a big part of the curriculum.



Blackwell School Alliance Vice-President Mario Rivera stands next to a class photo of himself when he was a student (picture on his right side) during a recent gathering at the school.

Photo: Kin Man Hui /Staff photographer

From its opening in 1909 until it was shuttered in 1965 during nationwide, court-ordered desegregation, the school educated students through junior high. After that, some trudged north across the railroad tracks to join the Anglo students at Marfa High School.

“The teachers were very good here. I never even knew there was another school for Anglos until I was in about the sixth grade,” recalled Betty Nuñez, 76.

Under bipartisan federal legislation introduced this fall, the roughly 100 surviving Blackwell alumni could see the school’s history preserved.

While other school buildings were demolished decades ago, the original schoolhouse and attached band hall have been nominated to receive permanent federal protection.

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Later named for Jesse Blackwell, a longtime teacher and principal, the campus once covered an entire city block. At its peak in the 1940s, when ranching flourished and the military had a big presence in Marfa, Blackwell enrollment approached 700.

While the students enjoyed a wide range of activities, including interscholastic sports and band, they also had to make do with hand-me-down sports equipment and used school books, some with pages missing.

Still, many cherish memories of the school and the teachers who helped them navigate English and Anglo culture.

“I was just a happy girl, going to school here. It never dawned on me what was really going on, why we were here,” said Alice Rivera, 76, Mario’s wife. They met as students at Blackwell.



Former Blackwell School student Alice Rivera stands in the school's only remaining building in Marfa on Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. From its opening in 1909 until 1965 when it was shuttered during nationwide court-ordered desegregation, the Blackwell School in Marfa, Texas educated Hispanic students through junior high school. After that, some trudged north across the railroad tracks to join the Anglo

In that era, so-called Mexican schools and even segregated public cemeteries were common along the

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With passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, school segregation became illegal.

In the late 1960s, most of the Blackwell buildings were razed to make way for a public housing project. The old schoolhouse was used intermittently for day care and vocational programs.

Alarming rumors

About 13 years ago, rumors circulated in Marfa that the campus' remaining building with its 15-foot ceiling and 2-foot-thick adobe walls might also be sold or demolished.

Joe Cabezuela, 76, who graduated from there in 1960, galvanized the effort to save the schoolhouse.

“I said, ‘Wait a minute, we won’t have anything left.’ That’s the last building of Blackwell to remind us of what Hispanics went through,” he said.

Through the efforts of former students and the Marfa Independent School District, the building was saved and has since become a community center and Blackwell museum.

The Blackwell School Alliance, representing former students, controls it through a 99-year lease with the school district.



Children stand outside the school in this undated photo. At the school's peak in the 1940s, enrollment approached 700.

Photo: Courtesy photo

The bill pending in Washington would make it a National Historic Site.

Introduced in September by U.S. Reps. Will Hurd, R-San Antonio, and Filemon Vela, D-Brownsville, the bill would give the school the permanent protection of the National Park Service.

Speaking of the nation's responsibility to preserve such places, so their history is not forgotten, Hurd said, "Blackwell School might represent a dark time in our nation's past, but we must not shy away from our past so future generations learn from it."

Given the political turbulence in Washington, it's no surprise that little has happened with the bill, said Dallas Kelly-Kerr, a senior manager with the National Parks Conservation Association, an advocacy group.

"There is not much opportunity for it this calendar year," she said, noting that sites commemorating Hispanic culture and history are sorely lacking within the National Park System.

"With the Blackwell School, we have a prominent landmark which is one of only a few still existing. It tells of Mexican American resilience as well as the story of discrimination in our education system," she said.

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Gretel Enck, 52, president of the Blackwell School Alliance, is a relatively recent arrival in Marfa and has taken the lead in pushing for national historic site status.



Blackwell School Alliance President Gretel Enck converses with former students and fellow board members at the school's only remaining building in Marfa on Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. From its opening in 1909 until 1965 when it was shuttered during nationwide court-ordered desegregation, the Blackwell School in Marfa, Texas educated Hispanic students through junior high school. After that,

“The big reason we feel the urgency to get this through now is obviously our stakeholder population is aging and we are losing them,” she said, noting that the coronavirus pandemic has complicated things.

During the application process, the Marfa school district, which is now 94 percent Hispanic, has been a helpful partner.

“For me, it’s personal. That’s where my grandmother went to school, although only to the third grade,” said Marfa ISD Superintendent Oscar Aguero, 51. The district enrollment is down to only 289 students.

“It’s preserving the history of Marfa and of the families of many of our students. It allows them to see who they are,” he said. “And it also lets us know, as Hispanics and Mexicans, how far we have come. If you look

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In 2017, architecture students from the University of Texas at San Antonio helped solve the mystery of exactly when the Blackwell School was built. Earlier erroneous accounts dated its construction to the 1880s. The decade is still listed on the state historical marker at the school.

A key piece of evidence confirming the 1909 construction date was the discovery of chimney bricks that were made in D'Hanis, which did not open a brickyard until 1905.

'A sweet lady'

In normal years, the school association would have an annual spring bash attended by hundreds, and the schoolhouse would be open on weekends. Now it is open only by appointment.

A recent visit there was a journey back into an era when, to some extent, Anglos and Hispanics led parallel lives.

Although most school records and furnishings have disappeared, enough old memorabilia and historical objects remain from the early 1900s.

The objects range from old red Bronco sports uniforms in glass frames to large formal portraits of girls in exquisite gowns, the annual Valentine queens.

There are also numerous black-and-white photos of school activities, a graduation program, PTA journals and a few comically small old wooden desks.



A vintage class photo of students from Blackwell School hangs on the wall in the only remaining school building.

Photo: Kin Man Hui /Staff photographer

And there's also band mascot Imelda Dominguez's small white satin uniform, with red and black trim, that was sewed by her grandmother.

On one wall is a framed formal photo of Willie Harper, who taught first grade for 27 years and later had the building named for her by a student committee.

"She was very beloved. She took kids who didn't know how to speak English and turned them into little scholars," Enck said.

One large bulletin board has the photos of many former students. Another has photos of more than 30 former teachers and the names of almost 100.

Pausing there, Nuñez pointed out a faded snapshot of a heavysset woman with glasses and her hair in a bun.

"This is my second grade teacher, Mrs. Giles. She was a sweet lady," she said. "She taught us to sing, but the kids would take advantage of that and throw different words into the songs."

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The peculiar affair occurred in 1954, when Davis decided to stage a mock funeral at the flagpole for “Mr. Spanish.” It was part of her constant effort to encourage her students to speak English while at school.

“A ceremony was arranged, a gravesite was dug at the entrance of the campus, speeches were composed, a cardboard coffin was constructed and pall bearers designated,” she wrote.

She had instructed students to bring small slips of paper bearing Spanish words. These were placed in the casket. After the solemn service, two boys were supposed to lower the casket into the grave. At that point, things went off-script, she wrote.



Children are seen in an undated photo in Mrs. Newsome's 2nd grade class the Blackwell School in Marfa. Originally called the Ward or Mexican School, the facility was the only public school for Marfa's Mexican and Mexican American children from 1909-1965, according to the Texas Historical Commission website. The school was later named for its longtime principal, Jesse Blackwell.

At the critical moment, a juvenile conflict arose between the two pallbearers. Spanish curses flew, dirt was thrown and the onlookers began giggling, then laughing hilariously.

life, by digging up a small box containing a Spanish dictionary.

Cabezuela, who participated in the two ceremonies, held a half-century apart, does not fault his old English teacher for burying Mr. Spanish.

“Mrs. Davis was a wonderful teacher who really wanted for all the Hispanic kids to learn English. And the only way to learn it was to practice it, which of course we didn’t,” he said.

A recent documentary, “The Children of Giant,” examined the complicated race relations in Marfa during the 1950s, when Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean came to town to film the Hollywood blockbuster.

It includes interviews with aging Blackwell students, some of whom had appeared decades ago as “Mexican” child extras in the original film.

In the 2017 documentary, Cabezuela spoke about the importance of preserving the school.

“Someday our grandchildren will come through here and see this. It happened and we don’t want to forget it,” he said. “We want to keep the memories of the present and of those who have passed. This is their school and their memorial.”

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