

**Chapter 23:
King Antonio's Exile**



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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"King Antonio Exiled" read the huge headlines of the *San Antonio Light*, which informed the people of San Antonio that the new Mexican American superintendent of the Edgewood School District had banned the traditional visits of Fiesta's reigning monarch to schools in the district.

For as far back as anybody can remember, King Antonio, the personification of the spirit of Fiesta, has been selected from the ranks of the Texas Cavaliers, an organization in San Antonio whose membership includes the so-called social elite of the city. Since the membership of this prestigious organization did not include any Hispanics, African Americans or Jews, this traditional relationship between the Texas Cavaliers and the Fiesta Association guaranteed that the reigning monarch was consistently Anglo.

This relationship is strange because, even if you have to respect the right of members of the Texas Cavaliers to set their own parameters for membership, the Fiesta activities of the king, and his similarly lily-white court, is heavily subsidized, not only by the Fiesta Commission, but by public funds from the City of San Antonio.

For many years, I had considered the psychological impact of this royal-plebeian relationship determined by race and ethnicity, where royalty is always Anglo. I have never been particularly impressed with the concept of royalty, let alone with the membership of this elitist group. My forefathers fought for the removal of the yoke of monarchy in America, not in the removal of the demented George in the 13 colonies, but for independence from the long of Spain and, subsequently, the removal of the naive and pompous Emperor Maximilian installed by the French to rule over what previously had been the Republic of Mexico.

When Queen Elizabeth of England visited children's programs in the Edgewood section of San Antonio, I declined an invitation to meet her. I was not about to take instruction on how to behave in her presence. Besides, I have always believed that she could stay home and tend to the behavior of her own children, who obviously have more hangups and need her more than the children in Edgewood.

On a more personal basis, as a school teacher and administrator in the Edgewood schools, I had witnessed distasteful behavior in the relationship between the mythical Fiesta ruler and his subjects. Although most of the King Antonio that visited the schools to get the kids excited for Fiesta exhibited the decorum expected from a visiting monarch, I did witness a situation in which the King and his royal court's behavior left much to be desired. On this occasion, they stayed in their convertibles in front of the school, safely out of reach of the kids they were visiting and tossed out coins especially made for the King's Fiesta activities. Several of the coins fell short of the kids, and, as kids are prone to do, they threw themselves on the ground in an attempt to retrieve the coins. The kids groveling in the dirt was found so amusing by the visiting royalty that they no longer attempted to toss the coins to the kids, preferring to throw them in the dirt to perpetuate the wallowing.

I resented this royal entertainment, not only because of the disgusting treatment of the kids, but also because of the more practical problem of getting them cleaned up prior to their return to the classrooms and, eventually, their homes. Parents who take great care to dress up their children for school tend to take exception when the kids return covered with dirt.

Following my appointment as superintendent of the Edgewood district, I received a letter from the Texas Cavaliers informing me of the schools King Antonio would visit that year and requesting my cooperation in making the necessary arrangements. Visits to minority schools during Fiesta is a public relations necessity since San Antonio minorities comprise the bulk of Fiesta carnival attendance, and it is this annual carnival that raises the funds for the subsidizing of all Fiesta activities, including activities of the Texas Cavaliers, their annual King and his court.

I wasn't particularly interested in making arrangements for the visit by the racially-segregated dignitaries, so I referred the matter to the district board of trustees. At the next board meeting, I distributed copies of the Cavalier's letter to the trustees and explained to them that in my professional opinion it was psychologically detrimental to the Mexican American children to play a perpetual subservient role to a consistently Anglo king.

The board bounced the ball back to me by refusing to consider a resolution establishing policy. They concluded that decisions concerning visitors in the schools was an administrative matter, and they would defer to my judgement. I thanked the board and informed them that that being the case, I did not wish to have King Antonio visit our schools.

Doris Wright, educational reporter from the *San Antonio Light*, was in attendance at the board meeting, and the next day's headlines proclaimed the banishment of King Antonio from the Edgewood schools.

The lack of Edgewood participation in San Antonio's celebration of the antebellum South must have been inconsequential to the Fiesta Commission and the Texas Cavaliers. What did prove to be of concern to them was the San Antonio minority reaction to the exile. I imagine that the all-Anglo Fiesta monarchs had been a bone of contention with the minority community for some time, because in no time at all, minority civic organizations, business and political leaders, and the public itself arose in support of my position. Various minority organizations scheduled non-Fiesta sponsored activities to run parallel to the official calendar of events. A massive minority boycott of Fiesta activities was in the works, and the Fiesta Commission was very cognizant of a possible disaster if the minority money from plebeian Fiesta participation failed to materialize in order to subsidize the elitist activities.

Since this was during the heyday of the civil rights movement, I am sure that there was some consideration of the impact of city subsidies being enjoined by the federal Department of Justice. Carryovers from President Lyndon Johnson's administration and the Warren Supreme Court would not be very tolerant of the use of public monies for the segregation and racial-ethnic exclusion commonly found in the San Antonio Fiesta.

Personally, I was contacted by a host of San Antonio's most prominent citizens, asking me to reconsider my position on the Edgewood visits. I was informed that the Texas Cavaliers evolved from the German Club, an ethnic group that by definition precluded Hispanic, African American and Jewish membership. When I asked how come the exclusion of minorities had been perpetuated by the present Texas Cavaliers, I was informed that membership priority is given to descendants of past members and that this policy was responsible for the all-white membership, not the intentional exclusion of minorities and Jews. I usually responded by stating that Adolph could have made a similar rationalization for the Nordic characteristic of his Hitler Youth.

My opposition to this institutional racism was quickly altered by the San Antonio media. I had objected to Edgewood schools being visited by members of racist organizations. Very quickly, my objection was changed in the media and presented as an objection to Anglos visiting the schools. I can't help but note that the assumption that all Anglos are racists was made in the media and not by me. Thus, my stand against racism was reversed, with a substantial portion of the San Antonio population perceiving me as a racist practicing reverse discrimination. This practice of switching roles and making the subjects of discrimination the discriminators, finding the victim guilty of the crime, has been so successful, that it is now standard practice in American race relations.

The erroneous perception did not particularly bother me. What bothered me was that the professional staff of the Edgewood district was predominantly Anglo, and there was extensive resentment as a result of the media erroneously reporting that I did not want members of their ethnic group visiting our schools. The extreme repercussion was an Anglo teacher who had been a close and dear friend of mine since the time that we were both teachers at Edgewood High School in 1954, coming by my office and tearfully asking me why I hated Anglos.

The Fiesta situation became so precarious that the commission called for a meeting with me and other representatives of minority organizations. The meeting chairman recapped the existing situation and surprised us by readily admitting that the entire problem had been created by the exclusion of minorities from Fiesta activities. In a brilliant Machiavellian move, he informed the audience that the Fiesta Commission was ready to rectify this past exclusion by adding additional events to the Fiesta agenda for minority participation, particularly fundraising events for minority organizations.

When I was playing in the Martin High School band in Laredo, we used to amuse the audience during the half-time football show by putting on what we called the Dumb Drum Major routine. In this marching event, the drum major would lead the band and consistently mess up by making a turn while the rest of the band continued straight down the field, or he would go straight while the entire band went in an opposite direction, much to the delight of the spectators. By the end of that meeting with the Fiesta Commission, I felt like the dumbest drum major in the state.

In no time at all, the minority organizations signed on as sponsors of Fiesta activities. I left the meeting before its conclusion, painfully aware of the triumph of pragmatism over principle and not wanting to see my minority colleagues groveling over the bones tossed to them by the Fiesta Commission, in much the same manner that their children had groveled in the dirt over the coins tossed to them by King Antonio.

The Fiesta Commission informed San Antonio that the problem had been resolved, and this resolution continues up to this day. The Fiesta Commission now sanctions El Rey Feo, the Charro Queen, and a host of minority-sponsored activities. But King Antonio is still selected from an organization with limited minority representation.

I say, "limited," because I was once called by a member of the Texas Cavaliers with whom I shared a hunting lease in Uvalde and informed that Dr. Aureliano Urrutia had become a member of that organization, so that the total exclusion of minorities was now a thing of the past.

Ruben López, who followed me as superintendent at Edgewood, was quick to open the doors of the district to King Antonio and his entourage.

Ever so often, Carlos Guerra, a columnist on the *San Antonio Express-News* writes a column about King Antonio always being Anglo and the exclusion of minorities from elitist Fiesta activities subsidized with public funds. His column is inevitably followed by public cries of his instigating divisiveness in the community and opening old wounds that time has completely healed.

The lack of sensitivity to minority cultures is still prevalent. When Dr. Henry Cisneros was mayor of San Antonio, he refused to ride in the Fiesta parade because his daughter was precluded from riding with him. The Fiesta organizers never understood the cultural connotations of the Hispanic family structure, nor the impact of this subtle attack on the structure of family while social scientists were informing us that the breakup of the family structure is accountable for most of our many social problems.

Very recently, the Fiesta Commission sanctioned a new event, “The Plantation,” an event in which the revelers celebrated in a pre-Civil War context, where the masters had plenty of time for recreation while the slaves did all of the work. The event was eliminated as a Fiesta activity when African American musicians refused to participate in this reconstruction of a shameful chapter in American history. I believe that to this day, the Fiesta commissioners still cannot understand why the African Americans took exception to this fun event.

As for me, I just stay away from Fiesta activities and avoid any contact with the reigning King Antonio. One night during each Fiesta, I work as a volunteer in one of the booths of the San Antonio Conservation Society. If I accidentally find myself on a San Antonio street while King Antonio and his court drive by, I turn my back to them as a modest form of protest over what I still consider to be a racist and detrimental tradition.