Feet in 2 Worlds
Cracked Open

In 1938, San Antonio was the center of the pecan shelling industry and one man, known as the Pecan King, controlled 50% of pecan production. The shellers were mostly Hispanic women and children. When the Pecan King slashed their pay, they took to the streets to strike against the injustice.

Producer Avery Thompson takes us to 1938 San Antonio, Texas to tell the story of the 1938 Pecan Shellers' Strike.

Shaka Mali Tafari: From Feet in 2 Worlds, this is The Hustle. I'm Shaka Tafari.

On The Hustle, we share stories about the ways immigrants navigate a changing economy — today and throughout history.

When I think of Texas, I envision the white American cowboy boldly forging the next frontier during the 19th century. Although the lawlessness of that era has faded (depending on who you ask), the Lone Star state remains a place where prosperity favors the industrial tycoons over everyday working people.

Texas prides itself on championing blue-collar workers, but a closer look at labor reveals a more complex reality.

As of 2023 Texas's GDP was $2.6 trillion dollars, making it the eighth-largest economy in the entire world. But its minimum wage — $7.25 an hour — has remained stagnant for over a decade and a half, leaving many Texans struggling to make ends meet. And labor data shows those struggling the most in the lone star state tend to be Hispanic and women. Immigrants also struggle. According to the Immigration Research Initiative, recent immigrants in Texas earn a median wage of only $20,000 per year.

Many are left wondering if they can ever find the collective strength to demand a more just economy for all Texans. But what if we could gain insight into making Texas more equitable by looking at its past?

On this episode, we'll explore an overlooked moment in Texas history. We'll hear how an unlikely group of workers came together — with the help of a young heroine and a song — to demand better pay. And in doing so, scored one of the American labor movement's most underrated victories.

Avery Thompson tells the story of the 1938 Pecan Shellers' Strike in San Antonio, Texas.

Avery Thompson: I was a little disappointed when I visited Milam Park in San Antonio. Not because it wasn't nice — it was.

> Avery Thompson: Got palm trees swaying in the breeze. There's some kids playing on the playground over there. Beautiful copper gazebo in the center of the park.

Avery: Having read a lot about this park in the 1920s and 30s, I learned about the important role it played in transforming not just San Antonio but arguably the entire country. So today's serenity felt, well, underwhelming.

> Avery: Pretty empty, a few people walking their dogs.

Avery: Back in the 1920s, Milam Park was better known as Plaza de Zacate. And it was the heart and soul of San Antonio's predominantly ethnically Mexican Westside, which included both Mexican immigrants and resident Tejanos, a term of pride among Mexican Americans in Texas.

> Dr. Priscilla Martinez: When people talk about the Westside, they really mean, okay, that's like the Mexican side of San Antonio. Actually, the most Mexican side maybe might be the better way to put it.

Avery: That's Dr. Priscilla Martinez, a San Antonian now teaching history and sociology at the University of Texas San Antonio. She took me back to the plaza of 100 years ago.

> Dr. Martinez: And at the time, it was kind of an open forum. So think about kind of like a public park or public space that a lot of the Mexican-American community, in particular, the Tejano community would kind of circulate.

Avery: In the tradition of plazas in Latin American cities, San Antonio's Plaza de Zacate was a hub of commerce and culture. A place where residents could grab a bite to eat from the famous chili queens who would serve their food at long communal tables. Or they could shop the open-air markets bursting with local produce, or just stroll around to see and be seen.

In one corner you might find young lovers dancing to a ranchera band. In the other, fruit pickers signing up to go work an upcoming harvest. But the plaza was also an important place of learning.

> Dr. Martinez: Folks who were literate and could read in both Spanish and English would take Mexican papers from northern Mexican states who were talking about you know, the revolution at the time, things like that, and would read out loud to other folks.

Avery: And it was there, amidst the hustle and bustle of Plaza de Zacate, that one little girl stood listening with great interest.

Emma Tenayuca: It was a center of activity. You could go to one corner of the plaza and listen to someone reading the bible. You could go to another place and see a group of people, one person with a newspaper reading to other workers the latest news from Mexico.

Avery: This is Emma Tenayuca speaking in 1987, towards the end of her life.

Dr. Martinez: Emma Tenayuca was born 1916 here on the Westside to kind of a working class, maybe lower middle class family. She was one of eleven children in her family.

Avery: If anyone could have known that little Emma Tenayuca would one day be famous, they'd probably have guessed it would be for her athleticism. Because apparently, Emma was quite the basketball player. But when she wasn't dribbling down the court, Emma Tenayuca was often at the plaza with her beloved grandfather, Francisco Zepeda.

Dr. Martinez: So she talked a lot about going there and really taking to heart the struggles of her community and her people. And her people she defined as ethnic Mexican people regardless of citizenship status.

Avery: Emma Tenayuca could see those struggles all around her. Because while San Antonio was thriving in the 1920s, mostly as the result of huge investments by the federal government to build military bases, not everyone in the city enjoyed those benefits.

Dr. McKiernan-Gonzalez: I think at that point in time San Antonio was trying to imagine itself as an American city but it was an America that didn't necessarily have Mexicans in it.

Avery: That's Dr. John McKiernan-Gonzalez. He's the director of the Center for the Study of the Southwest and associate professor of history at Texas State University.

Dr. McKiernan-Gonzalez: But the process of doing that meant that people who didn't fit that image of what an American looked like wouldn't be getting the kinds of services that they all deserved because people thought they were Mexicans and Mexicans didn't deserve to have access to public services.

Avery: So what you had in the 1920s, was a tale of two San Antonios — one undergoing a modern transformation. The other, the Westside, was a messy cluster of dirt roads and wooden shacks.Most of those shacks lacked electricity and plumbing. In some areas of the Westside, 50 families might share a single outhouse. But the struggles Emma Tenayuca witnessed as a child grew even worse during the Great Depression.

Emma Tenayuca: It was awful. I mean, you don't understand, I mean, people today cannot understand how awful that was because people lost their homes. They lost everything they had in the banks.

Avery: The collapse of hundreds of local banks impacted almost everyone in San Antonio, including Tenayuca's own beloved grandfather.

Emma Tenayuca: I felt very, very bad about it. And there was nobody, there wasn't one blessed man to get up and help.

Avery: Nearly fifty years after the Depression, you can still hear the anger in Emma Tenayuca's voice.Which explains the fervor with which she leapt into social activism in her teens.

Avery: In 1933, at age 16, Emma went to jail for standing on a picket line with workers from a local cigar factory. A few years later, she became an active member of the Communist Party of Texas. She even married its secretary, Homer Brooks. And one of the leading areas of focus for the newlyweds was the plight of San Antonio's pecan shellers. San Antonio lies in the heart of a region where pecan trees grow natively. And at that time, pecans were big business for the city. Again, Dr. Martinez:

Dr. Martinez: By the 1930s, San Antonio was really the center of pecan production in the United States. You had San Antonio producing about 40% of the pecans in the United States total.

Avery: And one man ruled San Antonio's pecan shelling industry — Julius Seligmann. The descendant of German Jewish immigrants, Julius Seligmann became known around San Antonio as "The Pecan King." By the 1930s, his company, Southern Pecan Shelling, gained control of more than a quarter of the entire nation's pecan output.

And he did this not by using the latest shelling technology of the day, but by using — or some would argue abusing — the abundant labor force of San Antonio's Westside.

Or as Emma Tenayuca puts it:

Emma Tenayuca: They did not go for machines because they had such a large group of people here to exploit.

Avery: Dr. Mckiernan-González, who was raised in both Mexico and the American South, says it's no surprise that the pecan shelling industry was centered in San Antonio's Westside.

Dr. Mckiernan-González: I want to say that pecans are really deeply embedded in Tejano and Tejana identity. I didn't grow up in San Antonio, but all of my friends who have like three or four or five or untold numbers of generations in San Antonio grew up knowing how to pick up pecans, sell them to the local pecan factory in terms of this little family way to get by.

Avery: Pecans were also familiar to the large influx of Mexicans who landed in San Antonio after fleeing the instability and danger surrounding their country's recent revolution.

Dr. Mckiernan-González: A lot of the people who ended up in San Antonio are of course still part of the pecan, the nueces regions of Mexico as well. So they would have come with their own experiences of shelling pecans, picking pecans, harvesting pecans.

Avery: For many Westside residents, their ancestral knowledge of pecans could be traced back to long before there were borders and nationalities that divided them.

Dr. Mckiernan-González: Thinking about pecans actually means thinking very seriously about the indigenous dimensions of Tejano identity. A lot of sort of like the domestic culture, the foods — that part of Mexican culture came from the people that did the cooking before the Spaniards showed up. It's kind of one of these knowledges that was passed from Coatecans to Mexican Coatecans to Mexicans to Tejanos.

Avery: Julius Seligmann The Pecan King capitalized on the intergenerational knowledge of his workforce — as so frequently happens with migrant workers, even to this day.

Dr. Mckiernan-González: You never hear about the skills people have when they arrive in this country, especially you don't ever think about the kinds of skills required to work as a migrant worker on someone else's land harvesting things where they don't even have to train people to do the harvesting or the picking that's necessary. That's all put on the families themselves.

Avery: At the peak of operations, the pecan shelling industry employed upwards of 20,000 San Antonians. The majority were women of the Westside. They did the difficult work of removing the soft pecan nut from its hard outer shell. It was grueling, monotonous, and frequently painful work.

Again, Dr. Martinez.

Dr. Martinez: I don't know if you've ever dug into a bag of pecans, but you crack it and split it open, cuts and nicks about the shell that is very hard, right? And so it is very delicate work that is very hard work for the amount of hours that you're doing it, for the amount of pounds that you are expected to generate per day. And so it was a very tough job to do.

Avery: More often than not, shellers worked in cramped sheds that didn't have enough ventilation.

Dr. Martinez: You know, dim lighting, if you're gonna have to pay attention to what you're doing, you have to hunch over, you're breathing in all the fine dust and things like that.

Avery: That dust found its way into the workers' lungs, contributing to San Antonio's exceedingly high tuberculosis rates.

Dr. Martinez: Particularly in ethnic Mexican communities. And so a lot of folks in academia really credit that to this correlation between unregulated workspaces without protections for workers and lung-related, tuberculosis-related issues.

Avery: But not all of the shellers worked in those company sheds. Many of Seligmann's labor force worked as contractors — meaning they took their work home. Which Dr. Martinez says worked out great for Julius Seligmann. And it was there in the shacks and houses of the Westside where the work was spread among family members, including children. In some households, it wasn't uncommon to have three generations of a family cracking pecans from morning till night.

Dr. Martinez: So this is why a lot of Mexican women were drawn to this industry because this was something that they could do around different schedules, right? So it was a very much work from home, work in your community and kind of you set your own hours in that sense. But what drove you was you had to meet a certain amount of quota that the grower gave you.

Avery: Even with numerous family members shelling, the pay was abysmal. Again, Emma Tenayuca.

Emma: And they would give them their money in small envelopes. And you wouldn't see more than, I mean if a whole family made 4 dollars, that was a lot of money.

Avery: Emma was right. The average pecan sheller made less than three dollars a week or 66 dollars in today's money — a pittance compared to even the lowest paid industrial work of the day. But Seligmann wasn't the only ruthless employer. Another shelling company owner, for example, justified his similarly poor pay as if he were actually doing his employees a favor, saying:

Voice Actor: You can't make a Mexican work a whole week if they have money enough to live on.

Avery: Still, it would be too simple to say the city was divided cut and dry by race. Many white San Antonians rallied behind the shellers and argued for a more equitable society, including Seligmann's own rabbi. But Seligmann ignored the pleas.

On January 31st, 1938, Julius Seligmann the pecan king slashed the pay for shelled pecans by nearly 20% in a single day. When word got around to the sheds and shacks of the Westside — the pecan shellers decided enough was enough and walked off the job.

Roughly 12,000 shellers, mostly Hispanic women — took to the streets of San Antonio. And at their center was 21 year old Emma Tenayuca. When we return, Emma and the shellers make their stand.

[BREAK]

Avery: We're back in San Antonio in February of 1938 as more than 10,000 shellers have taken to the streets to demand better pay and working conditions. And at their lead is 21 year old Emma Tenayuca. While not a sheller herself, Emma Tenayuca became the leading voice of the strike. And that voice was a fiery one, earning her the nickname La Pasionaria de Tejas, or the Passionate One of Texas.

In photos of Emma at this time, she wears patterned dresses and skirt suits. Rare is the photo in which Emma doesn't offer a big, charming smile to the camera. With Emma at their fore, the pecan shellers take to the streets. But while the shellers were committed to protesting peacefully, the city didn't return the favor, says Dr. Mckiernan-González.

> Dr. Mckiernan-González: San Antonio did not respond well to having a citywide general strike run by Tejanas, cutting down traffic in downtown, embarrassing the city fathers, having demonstrations at the Alamo.

Avery: Without provocation, the police tear-gassed the strikers, who again were mostly women, and attacked them with billy clubs and baseball bats. More than a thousand others were arrested under bogus charges and packed into overcrowded jail cells. Including Emma Tenayuca.

> Emma: And I was charged with, what was it? I didn't have a permit, and assaulting a policeman, you know. And I was tried, I was tried.

Avery: When confronted about the heavy-handed response, San Antonio's police chief, Owen Kilday, pointed to the fact that Tenayuca and some of the other activists were members of the Communist party. He saw that as an imminent threat that had to be stopped.This wasn't a peaceful protest, he claimed, it was the beginning of a revolution. That claim was convenient for others, too, says Dr. Martinez.

> Dr. Martinez: But you also had other actors like the Catholic church that was very much afraid of a radicalized Mexican populace that were very much anti-clerical, anti-religious and so you had people coming in from all sides.

Avery: But while the shellers were packed into those crowded jail cells — something special happened.They found their anthem.

> David Spener: My name is David Spener. I'm a sociologist. I work at the department of sociology and anthropology at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. And I'm the author of the book, *We Shall Not Be Moved, No Nos Moverán: Biography of a Song of Struggle*.

Avery: Dr. David Spener has spent a lot of time studying the song We Shall Not Be Moved. It began as a spiritual hymn in the American South. From there, it underwent many transformations as it found popularity in Protestant churches, and then as a labor movement song used by coal miners in Appalachia.

Avery: But it was in San Antonio that the song found a whole new audience.

Music - No Nos Moverán

Dr. Spener: Yeah, the song We Shall Not Be Moved, as far as we know, was first translated into Spanish in the city jail here in San Antonio during the pecan-sheller strike.

And of course, a lot of the people who were in jail there with them were Spanish speakers, Mexicans, Mexican Americans from the Westside of San Antonio who were pecan shellers or their supporters. And Santos Vasquez began to sort of translate on the spot the lyrics of the song. And in English it goes we shall, we shall not be moved, we shall, we shall not be moved, just like a tree planted by the water, we shall not be moved.

Avery: The version the shellers sang wasn't exactly a direct translation.

Dr. Spener: You know he was doing this on the spur of the moment. And you have to, You know, the meter is important, right? And so if you sing, cómo un piñon que resiste al viento, it fits. And then the song is easy because basically it's the old sort of West African style call and response format. So you have a song leader who shouts out a verse, Kilday esta loco, right? You know, the Sheriff Kilday is crazy or unidos en la huelga — united in the strike no nos moverán right? We shall not be moved.

Music - No Nos Moverán

Avery: Emboldened by the song, the shellers carried on their strike. Despite unfair publicity by the press, despite police violence, and despite deplorable conditions in those jail cells...they would not be moved...

Dr. Spener: (singing) No nos moverán.

Avery: Eventually, the strike attracted attention beyond the city. It was covered in big media outlets like Time Magazine, which wrote:

Voice Actor: Everyone in San Antonio knows about little Emma Tenayuca, a slim, vivacious labor organizer with black eyes and a red philosophy.

Avery: The strike even became an international affair. After the San Antonio police attacked a Mexican citizen who wasn't even involved in the strike and imprisoned 63 others who were, the Mexican consult got involved.The shellers also sent a desperate plea to the governor of Texas stating:

Voice Actor: Demand you intervene and stop terroristic attacks of San Antonio police upon striking pecan workers of Local 175 SA. Urge you use your authority as governor to protect strikers civil rights in peaceful picketing and strike. This in name of Workers Alliance members and liberty — Workers Alliance Local 258.

Avery: In response, the governor of Texas created a commission to investigate what was going on in San Antonio. And that commission concluded that the police had gone too far, but it resulted in little, if any, change. Meanwhile, on the strikers' side, pressure was building for Tenayuca to step back from the limelight, due to her Communist connections and the response it ignited. Richard Croxdale is a professor of economics at Austin Community College and the director of research for People's History in Texas.

Richard Croxdale: Emma claims that even though she stepped back, and says she stepped back willingly, but I don't think anybody believes that. I mean she wrote everything. So Emma was still very much very much involved.

Avery: With Emma still supporting the shellers from behind the scenes, the strike persisted.

We have few details about how such a large group of mostly impoverished women were able to sustain themselves throughout this period. What we do know though is that they organized their own soup kitchens—well, until the city shut them down citing some dubious health and sanitation concerns. But despite the city's best efforts, the shellers persisted.

Then, after more than five weeks since the strike had begun — The Pecan King Julius Seligmann finally agreed to arbitration.

Both parties made their case to a three person board, which ruled in favor of the shellers ordering higher wages and formally acknowledging the international shellers union.

The shellers had won.

Again, Richard Croxdale.

Richard Croxdale: And it was a major victory. It was a major victory. I think it was one of the biggest mass strikes. It was Hispanic, it was women, and they won.

Avery: Sadly though, the shellers' victory was short-lived. Because in October of that year Congress enacted the Fair Labor Standards Act. And with it came a minimum wage of 25 cents an hour, a rate far higher than that agreed upon by Seligmann. Which just goes to show how unfairly the shellers were being paid and how modest their demands were. But instead of increasing wages to 25 cents an hour, Julius Seligmann opted to mechanize his operation.

Richard Croxdale: When they pass the Fair Labor Standards Act, they say, it's going to throw everybody out of work, it's caused this major disruption in the economy. And it turned out that the only industry that was affected was the pecan shellers, because they had had a big strike and they'd gotten their wage up to what, five, eight cents, you know, and here's 25 cents. So the entire industry mechanized.

Avery: So across the Westside the sound of workers chattering and cracking pecans was replaced with the whir and crunch of Seligmann's machines.

SFX - antique shelling machines

Avery: Over the next three years, machines replaced more than 10,000 shellers in San Antonio.

Richard Croxdale: Even though most of them lost their jobs at some point. But I think that's part of the process, is that you're going to mechanize, you don't want people spending their lives hand shelling pecans. They can then go out, and then when they move on to another job, they know that you take your union with you, and you keep organizing, and you keep pushing, and you know how to do it. And you look to the people who can help you and you support them. And they taught the community that you know with organization you can achieve things. So yeah, I think it was a success.

Avery: The shellers' victory, short lived as it might have been, had a profound impact on the social and political landscape of San Antonio. The following year, a mayoral candidate campaigned heavily on the Westside — a first. This courtship of Westside voters was proof that San Antonio no longer imagined itself as a city without Mexicans in it, as Dr. Mckiernan-González had described it.

In other words, the Westside had arrived. Dr. Martinez says that the shellers' victory also laid the groundwork for later movements, namely those of the Chicano civil rights in the 60s and 70s.

Dr. Martinez: You had really a big takeaway of grassroots movements too. So Mexican women were kind of the community organizers here and they took a lot of that work and while you might have had a lot of Chicano and Tejano male spokespersons, the people that did a lot of the work were the women and that really persisted, and didn't really change.

Avery: As for Emma Tenayuca, while she got to celebrate the strike's victory — her involvement in it had long-lasting consequences. Essentially blacklisted in her hometown, Emma was unable to find work in San Antonio. The FBI was also keeping close tabs on her. So, Richard Croxdale says, she moved to San Francisco.

Richard Croxdale: She went to California, laid low at some relatives' houses and you know you go through the Red Scare and the anti-Communist movement, McCarthyism of the '50s, you know you learn to just keep your head down.

Avery: It wasn't until years later that she finally felt it safe to return to San Antonio and worked as a schoolteacher. And the community she had so bravely defended in her youth did its best to protect her.

Richard Croxdale: People would come asking about Emma Tenayuca and they'll say, "Oh, we don't know, we don't know nothing, you know. I don't think she's around anymore. She's out in California."

Avery: It wasn't until after Emma retired from teaching that she felt comfortable giving interviews. And even in those she was quite guarded. In a 1987 interview with the Institute of Texan Cultures, Emma had only this to say of her involvement in the strike:

Emma Tenayuca: I did not keep one piece of paper or anything because I never gave it any importance. So I'm happy, I'm given credit or if they want to give me credit and if they don't, I'll stay home and read, know, it doesn't matter to me.

Avery: Maybe it was this reluctance of Emma's to draw attention to herself that contributed to her name falling out of the public consciousness. But that likely wasn't the only reason. Emma Tenayuca is just one of the many people throughout American history who have been overlooked because of who they were and what they represent.

Richard Croxdale: I think it's just your general, oh it's women, oh it's Hispanic, oh it's minorities, it's just not important. I think they just neglect it, they don't even consciously do it, it's just what they do.

Dr. Martinez: I teach San Antonio history here at UTSA and I think if I asked my students if they knew who Emma Tenayuca was they would probably say no, but once they hear the story they are so invigorated by the power of everyday people to impact their communities and think about their communities but to make the world a better place for others really hits home. So I'm excited to introduce the next generation to people like her.

Avery: But thankfully, in recent years the city of San Antonio has taken its own efforts to honor one of its most overlooked daughters. In 1991, Emma Tenayuca was inducted into the San Antonio women's Hall of Fame. And in 2009, the Texas Historical Commission made a new addition to Milam Park.

Avery: Believe it or not there are some pecan nuts crunching under feet here…I think this is it…

Avery: On the southern side of Milam Park, near some pecan trees there stands a plaque honoring Emma Tenayuca…

Avery: And it reads, "During the 1930s, San Antonio native Emma Tenayuca was a prominent leader of a movement that fought deplorable working conditions, discrimination, and unfair wages on behalf of the city's working poor. As a child,

Tenayuca had often visited the Plaza (now Milam Park), where residents gathered to discuss politics and civil issues in the days before Spanish radio programming. These visits awakened in her an awareness of injustice, and she converted her concern into action."

Avery: And while it's not a statue, or a monument to the women and families of the Westside that stood up for justice — it's a start.

For Feet in 2 Worlds, in San Antonio, I'm Avery Thompson.

Shaka: The Hustle is hosted by me, Shaka Tafari. Today's story is produced by Avery Thompson. It is edited by Feet in 2 Worlds editing fellow Lushik Lotus-Lee, with additional editing by Mia Warren and Quincy Surasmith. Feet in 2 Worlds' Managing Director is Mia Warren. Our Managing Editor is Quincy Surasmith. Our Development Coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Jocelyn Gonzalez is our technical director and engineer. Sharon Bardales is our assistant engineer. Fact-check is by Julie Schwietert Collazo. Original theme music by Gautam Srikishan. Additional music is from Blue Dot Sessions. Visit our website at Fi2W.org to listen to more stories about immigrants. Thank you for listening.

Quincy Surasmith: Feet in 2 Worlds is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The Fernandez Pave the Way Foundation, an anonymous donor, contributors to our annual NewsMatch campaign, and listeners like you. Make a tax deductible contribution today at fi2w.org. That's F I the number 2 W dot org.

CITATION
Avery Thompson, Producer. "Cracked Open." *Feet in 2 Worlds*. April 29, 2025. fi2w.org/cracked-open/