

**CROSSOVER DREAMS**

Raised in a squalid no-man's land between the Rio Grande and Anglo El Paso, Bowie High's Mexican-American players made names for themselves by mastering the national pastime.



# THE BARRIO BOYS

IN 1949 EL PASO'S BOWIE BEARS, A TEAM OF POOR HISPANIC PLAYERS WHO WERE TOO UNWORLDLY TO BE INTIMIDATED BY THEIR MORE AFFLUENT ANGLO OPPONENTS, CAME FROM NOWHERE TO WIN TEXAS'S FIRST HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

*By Alexander Wolff* Photograph by EL PASO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Y**ou'd saw off a broomstick for a bat. For a ball you'd beg spools of thread from the textile plant, enough to wrap into a wad you could seal with carpenter's tape. You'd go back to that factory for cloth remnants to sew together for a glove, which you'd stuff with cotton you picked at the ranch on the fringe of the barrio. That's what you did as a kid of Mexican blood in El Paso during the 1940s to play the game that, more than anything else, could make you an American. But to become a champion at that game—to beat all Anglo comers in a world that belonged to them—how would you do that?

Borders are shape-shifting things: sometimes barriers, sometimes membranes, sometimes overlooks from which one people take the measure of another. If you were

to transport yourself to the El Paso of 1949 and take up a position as far south as possible—by the north shore of the Rio Grande, in a netherland not wholly of the U.S. but not of Mexico either—you'd be a cutoff throw from Bowie High School, the only public secondary school in the U.S. then dedicated to educating Mexican-Americans. The people of south and east El Paso dealt every day with two kinds of border. The geographical one at their backs reminded them of their Mesoamerican heritage. The aspirational border just to the north, an east-west highway through downtown, was a tantalizing gateway to their country of choice.

Andy Morales, a member of the 1949 Bowie High baseball team, used to walk the eight blocks from his home up to Alameda Avenue, the local stretch of U.S. Highway 80, the artery that ran from San Diego to the Georgia coast. Beyond the avenue lay the Anglos' turf, where a Mexican-American would think twice before entering. Instead they focused on the road. "My friends and I, we'd compete counting out-of-state license plates on Alameda," Morales says. "I set the record one Saturday: 39 in a two-hour period." Plate-spotting gave Morales and his buddies a chance to glimpse the energy of a country ready to burst after the end of World War II, a place where they gradually came to believe they belonged.

They would owe that awakening in large part to the game they loved. Bowie High didn't field a baseball squad until 1946, when a wiry, energetic man, not 5' 6", arrived from San Antonio to start one. Three years later the Bowie team included Morales, the wisecracking second baseman who never took a book home from school because there wasn't enough light to read by; Javier (Lefty) Holguin, the pitcher with a knuckleball so loco that nobody would play catch with him; Jose (Rocky) Galarza, the smoky-eyed third baseman to whom Bowie coeds dedicated yearbook pages; and Ramon Camarillo, the catcher whose hunches came to him in dreams.

Despite poverty that made them scrounge for equipment and wonder if they'd have enough food to eat, and despite discrimination that subjected them to stinging slurs and other indignities from Anglos, these boys and the other 11 players on the 1949 Bowie Bears would win the first Texas high school baseball tournament ever staged.

#### GLORY BOUND →

From left: Nemo, Holguin, Rodriguez and Lara packed bats for the trip to Austin for the state championship.

**B**owie High sat in El Paso's Second Ward, or Segundo Barrio, home to the city's leach field and sewage-treatment plant. A smelting operation, stockyards and a meat-packing company further fouled the air. Nowhere in the U.S. did more babies die of diarrhea. The barrio had no paved streets, much less sidewalks, streetlights or parks, and 50,000 people packed themselves into less than one square mile, about twice the population density of New York City. Those not living in adobe hovels were warehoused in presidios like the ones in which Camarillo and Bowie first baseman Tony Lara grew up, where as many as 175 families—at least 700 people—were shoehorned into a single block of two-story tenement buildings, with one communal cold-water commode serving each row of two-room apartments. Compared with Anglo El Paso, the Second Ward was, Camarillo said, "like another country."

## THE SEGUNDO BARRIO HAD NO PAVED STREETS, MUCH LESS SIDEWALKS, STREETLIGHTS OR PARKS.



FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF IRMA ORTEGA; COURTESY OF CHARLES HERRERA

One might have expected Bowie's '49ers to be cowed by their more affluent, better equipped Anglo opponents, but, Lara says, "we were so dumb, we didn't know how to be intimidated." This obliviousness was carefully cultivated. Bowie's baseball coach made sure his players didn't wallow in want and ethnic victimization, diverting them instead with such requirements as daily classroom attendance, executing the hit-and-run and mastering the nuances of English by speaking nothing else around him. "With Nemo there were no heroes," says Gus Sambrano, a shortstop on the 1949 team. "He was the leader. His message was, 'You have leadership; follow.' We were the followers."

William Carson (Nemo) Herrera was a *fronterizo*, a child of the borderland like his players, and he probably knew them better than their parents did. He was born in Brownsville, Texas, in 1900; his father, Rodolfo, had immigrated after losing his landholdings in the political unrest that would lead to the Mexican Revolution, and his mother, Carolina, had roots in the Canary Islands. The family moved to San Antonio when Nemo was seven, and by age 13 he had become the bat boy of the San Antonio Bronchos of the Texas League. He steeped himself in the game. His speed and tenacity served him well in basketball as well as baseball at Brackenridge High. He would

→ **BACKSTOP**  
Nemo not only taught the Bears baseball but also made sure they spoke English and stayed in school.

excel at both sports at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and play semipro baseball during summers.

After graduating he became the head basketball coach and assistant football coach at Beaumont (Texas) High for a year before joining Gulf Oil's

subsidiary in Tampico, Mexico. There he progressed from pipeline work to the payroll department while playing second base on the company team.

In July 1927, during his fourth year in Tampico, Herrera was spiked during an industrial-league game and wound up in the town's American hospital. Within a month he had married the head nurse on the floor, Mary Leona Hatch, an Anglo who had been orphaned as a girl near Opelousas, La. A year later Herrera took a job as baseball and basketball coach at Lanier High in San Antonio's West Side barrio, where he would spend 18 years, including all of the Depression. His basketball teams rarely had much size, so he introduced what later generations would recognize as a full-court press, "only we called it a man-to-man-all-over-the-court defense," Herrera would say. Five times his teams reached the state final four, winning titles in 1943 and '45. Herrera acquired enough of a reputation for Texas A&M to offer him its basketball coaching job, but he turned it down for the stability of public school work. In 1946 Bowie came calling, offering a better salary and the benefits of a desert climate for Mary Leona, who suffered from hay fever, and Bill, one of their two sons, who had asthma.

Herrera's new high school belied the squalor of the Segundo Barrio. When the city expanded the school in 1941 onto what had once been a slag heap, a complex of athletic fields girdled by cottonwoods

and elms bloomed in the floodplain of the Rio Grande. Signs throughout the school warned students to speak only English, and special pronunciation classes walked them through phonemes and diphthongs. "I once asked the girl sitting in front of me for a piece of paper in Spanish," Sambrano recalls. "I got suspended, and my mom and dad said, 'This was the first time, and it'll be the last!'"

La Bowie, as it was called, was a temple of assimilation. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt federalized the all-Hispanic Company E of the Texas National Guard's 141st Infantry Regiment late in 1940, half the soldiers had been Bowie Bears. Forty former Bowie students gave their lives during World War II, most of them as members of Company E, whose ranks were steadily thinned through the Italian campaign, from Salerno to San Pietro to the slaughter at the Rapido River, where over two days in January 1944 German soldiers killed, wounded or captured virtually every GI not swept to his death by the current. At the outset of the 1948–49 school year Bowie dedicated a memorial to its fallen 40, and an ROTC color guard concluded each day with a retreat ceremony, lowering the flag that flew above that cenotaph.

**H**errera worked to make baseball one of Bowie's tools of Americanization. He set up a summer league in the barrio and placed kids on American Legion and commercially sponsored teams. Then he bird-dogged the games, nudging prospects he liked to go out for the

Bowie varsity the following spring. (A decade later, after *Brown v. Board of Education* forced El Paso to close all-black Douglass High School, Herrera enticed a bilingual African-American kid from the South Side to enroll at Bowie; future NCAA-champion basketball coach Nolan Richardson would star for Nemo in hoops as well as baseball.)

El Paso was a military town, and eventually Nemo took his guys to play base teams at Fort Bliss and Biggs Field, where they often outperformed their older, bigger, stronger hosts. "We went out on the field against those base teams not knowing any better," says Morales, attributing many of the Bowie boys' victories to Herrera's enforced obliviousness. Always the Bears ate at the mess. "Those were the only days we'd get three square meals," Morales says.

*The Growler*, the school newspaper, could have taken its name from the sound in a Bowie student's stomach. Mary Leona Herrera would pack her husband off to work each day with extra sandwiches, which he left in plain sight so they could be "stolen" by his famished boys. As their stomachs filled up, so did their heads. Molding his baseball teams in the image of his basketball squads, Herrera played small ball before it, too, had a name. "We used to work on some plays for hours and hours," says Morales. "We won games on details, not because we hit the ball out of the park."

Herrera spent Saturday mornings chasing down truants. "He'd say to me, 'I'm gonna kick their butts if they're not back in school,'" remembers Bill Herrera, 77, who would accompany his father on his rounds. But back at Bowie, Nemo would just as doggedly plead the cases of those same kids to principal Frank Pollitt.

The coach treated his baseball diamond like a drawing-room carpet, picking stray pebbles off the infield. And he encouraged teasing for its democratizing effect. One day first baseman Lorenzo Martinez showed up at practice with a new glove, bought across the river in Juárez. "It smelled like a dead salmon," Morales recalls. "Nemo said, 'You paid for that?' The madder Martinez got, the more Nemo encouraged us to give it to him.

"Nemo had a wide nose with huge nostrils, and when he got mad he looked like a raging bull. We used to joke that we should all get toreador capes." One day, as a few Bears nursed beers in a Juárez cantina, Herrera walked in. They figuratively reached for their capes. "I'll tell you the truth," he said. "I'd rather see you guys drink beer than soda pop. Soda pop will ruin your health."

If a Bear took only one thing away from his coach, it was a credo that became an incantation. "It's not who you are or where you're from," Nemo would say. "It's who you become." The last of those words synced with the striving of the postwar generation, with the American Dream, with all those cars whizzing east and west on Highway 80.

By the spring of 1949 the new coach's spadework had begun to pay off. A San Antonio sportswriter noted "the wonderful spirit" of the Bowie baseball team—"the way the pitchers bear down, the sharp fielding and baserunning reminiscent of the old St. Louis Gashouse Gang." *The Aztec*, the Bowie yearbook, had already gone to press by the time the Bears edged El Paso High, the Anglo school on the North Side, to win the district title, so beneath a team photo the editors had written, *Good Luck to you, Team, and when these Aztecs reach you, may you have lived up to those early-season forecasts.*



## "IT'S NOT WHO YOU ARE OR WHERE YOU'RE FROM," NEMO WOULD PREACH. "IT'S WHO YOU BECOME."

**W**hen the Bears reached Lamesa, Texas, for the best-of-three bi-district playoffs against Lamesa High, their appearance on the sidewalks caused gawkers to pour out of storefronts. "You'd have thought the circus had come to town," Sambrano recalls. Some people made cracks like, "Why don't you speak English?" and "Remember the Alamo," while others called the players "hot tamales" and "greasy Mexicans."

Herrera found a restaurant that would serve the team, but not in its largely empty dining room; tables and chairs were hastily set up in the kitchen. The Bears' coach rarely brought up the discrimination his boys faced, for fear they might be tempted to use it as an excuse. Herrera regarded prejudice as the problem of the prejudiced, Sambrano says, best met with an even temper and devotion to the task at hand.

Bowie's Ruben Porras three-hit Lamesa to win the series opener 9-1, and the next day Trini Guillen scattered five hits in the 8-0 shutout that clinched the bi-district title. "Those guys were big," Sambrano remembers, "but we had what they didn't: speed." Against the Golden Tornados, the El Paso *Herald-Post* reported, the Bears "made a race track out of the diamond." In the first inning of each game Bowie scored a run on a lone hit and either an error or a walk.

By sweeping Lamesa, Bowie earned a trip to Austin for the single-

being brown, I didn't know which was for me. I asked a husky Anglo guy which one I was supposed to use." Morales took the man's reply ("I don't give a s---") as permission to use the white one.

In Austin, while most of the other visiting teams stayed in hotels, the Bowie team had to sleep on Army cots set up beneath the stands of Memorial Stadium, the football field on the Texas campus, and to make the long slog across the field to the Longhorns' field house to use the bathroom. But to Herrera's naive boys, the unusual accommodations only heightened the adventure. They lined the cots up like hurdles and ran races. When Hispanic businesses and social organizations back home sent telegrams of support, the Bears delighted in the spectacle of a Western Union messenger driving his motorcycle up the stadium ramp for deliveries. One day four players ventured downtown to see a movie and were bewildered when they were told, "Mexicans sit upstairs." They waited for the usher to turn a corner, then scrambled into seats in the orchestra in the dark. "We watched *The Streets of Laredo*," shortstop Ruben Rodriguez recalls, "with William Holden."

Facing Stephenville High in the quarterfinals, Bowie made another display of first-inning resourcefulness, scoring three runs on two hits. The press had expected Herrera to start his ace, Guillen, who was 7-0 for the season. One reporter wondered why the Bowie coach instead "gambled with his Number 2 pitcher."

elimination quarterfinals of the state tournament. "If memory serves," Lara recalls drily, "there were eight teams, and we were rated 10th to win it all."

Racial segregation still prevailed in Texas during the 1940s, but Mexican-Americans confounded the easy dichotomies of black and white. In Lubbock, where the team made a rest stop on the way to Austin, a sign in one window read, NO DOGS OR MEXICANS. "I remember seeing two drinking fountains, one COLORED and one WHITE," Morales says. "Me

"Number 1, Number 2, who can tell?" Herrera replied, leaving unsaid that Guillen had just spent four days in the hospital with strep throat. Porras—"the dark-skinned righthander," as the *Austin American-Statesman* described him—struck out six while limiting Stephenville to two hits in the 5-1 victory.

The wisdom of using his ace sparingly became clear the next day, in the semifinal against Waco High. The game lasted three hours. Guillen held up until the fourth, when Waco touched him for two runs and Herrera brought Porras on in relief.

With the score tied at two in the sixth, Rodriguez stole third, then sprinted for home on a long fly ball. "I would have scored easily tagging up and that would have won us the game," Rodriguez remembers, "but me like a dummy forgot there was only one out. The ball was caught, and I got doubled up. Nemo almost strangled me, he was so mad."

The score remained tied at two into the 10th, when Waco loaded the bases with nobody out. Suddenly Herrera yelled in Spanish, "Watch the guy on third! He's gonna steal!" Camarillo called for a pitchout and picked the runner off. It was the only time any '49er can remember Herrera addressing the players in Spanish. Camarillo then cut down another runner trying to advance to third during the rundown, and during the next at bat he caught one more trying to steal second.

In the following inning Bowie centerfielder Fernie Gomez, his back to home plate, preserved the tie by running down a long drive with a catch that his teammates would recognize in Willie Mays's famous World Series play five years later. But in the top of the 12th Waco took a 3-2 lead on a double and Morales's two-base error. That might have doomed Bowie had Morales not delivered a reversal of fortune in the bottom of the inning. With Bears on second and third, Morales hit a grounder that eluded the Waco second baseman to tie the game. Then the fates squared accounts with Rodriguez too: His quailing single dropped into short centerfield to send Gomez home with the game-winner.

→ **HEADS UP**  
The Bears scratched out wins with alert plays such as Rodriguez's steal of third in the state semis.

**N**either of El Paso's daily papers sent a reporter to the tournament, so people back home followed Bowie's progress through the collect calls Herrera placed to KTSM Radio. His boys, Herrera said in his call after the Waco game, "just don't know when to quit. They're eating well and hitting that ball, and that wins ball games." Surely it's one of the few times a coach has credited a victory to eating well.

In the final, Austin's Stephen F. Austin High, the tournament's No. 1 seed, enjoyed more than home field advantage. The Maroons hadn't lost to another high school all season, even beating the Longhorns' freshmen. They had swept Robstown in their bi-district series by a combined score of 36-1 and in the semifinals eliminated Denison 12-0. The Boston Braves would soon sign the Maroons' ace, righthander Jack Brinkley, to a \$65,000 bonus. Brinkley had allowed



only one hit in his quarterfinal start, a 2–0 win over Lubbock.

In the final Herrera intended to counter Brinkley by pitching Guillen, but before game time he asked his catcher, Camarillo, for his thoughts. Camarillo nominated Lefty Holguin, arguing that the knuckleballer would keep the Maroons off-balance. (Camarillo later confessed that he volunteered Holguin because he had dreamed the Bears would win the title with him on the mound.) Herrera agreed—Guillen could still barely speak, and Porras had pitched 15 innings in two days—with the proviso that Holguin would get the hook if he became wild. “When you’ve got just one left,” Herrera would later say, “that’s who you pitch.”

During Austin’s half of the first inning, each Maroons hitter returned to the dugout with the same verdict: Holguin was “just a good batting-practice pitcher,” as one told his coach, according to the *Austin American-Statesman*. “We’ll get him next inning.”

The next inning came, and the next and the next, yet Austin couldn’t muster a hit off Holguin. Meanwhile, Bowie seized a 1–0 lead in its usual fashion, jumping on a couple of first-inning errors. But after Holguin walked two Maroons in the fourth, Herrera was true to his word, lifting Lefty for Guillen. In the sixth inning Bears rightfielder Ernesto Guzman tripled, and two infield errors on a grounder by Lara allowed both Bears to cross, putting Bowie up 3–0.

In the last inning Austin finally kindled to life. Brinkley, the pitcher, led off with a single and advanced to second on a walk. Guillen struck out the next man, but Brinkley scored after Galarza misplayed a slow roller, leaving runners on second and third. The next Austin hitter sent a single to right to knock in a second run, and as the Maroons’ third base coach waved the tying run home, the favorites looked to seize their chance.

That’s when all of Bowie’s preparation—the harping on details, the numbing repetition, the many games against military-base teams around El Paso—paid its biggest dividend. From right Guzman sent the ball on a line. Morales, the cutoff man, let it go through to Camarillo, who fixed a tag on the Maroons’ base runner for the second out.

On the play at the plate another Maroon, also representing the tying run, made his way to second base. An infield hit edged him to third. Whereupon the next Austin hitter slapped a sharp ground ball.

At least some of the 2,700 fans there that night must have wondered what the Bowie shortstop was thinking, dropping to one knee. “I was ready to block it, just in case,” Rodriguez says. “I said, ‘This damn ball’s not going through me.’” He caught the ball cleanly, stood up and whipped it across the diamond. Cradled safely in Lara’s borrowed glove, the ball made the urchins of El Paso lords of all Texas.

**T**here was no celebration when it was over,” Morales recalls. “We took it as part of how Nemo raised us—we just picked up our belongings and walked out of there.”

The Bowie players don’t recall shaking hands with their opponents. And though the Bears received a trophy—“I mean, it must be about three feet high,” Herrera marveled in his collect call that night—there was no formal presentation or other official act recognizing that Bowie had won Texas’s inaugural baseball championship. The Bears had scratched out nothing but unearned runs to win the final, and to a typical Texan of the time it must have seemed that an alien team had seized the title by alien means. The *Austin American-Statesman* reacted as if Pancho Villa had just led a raid over the border: *Amigo, the Bowie Bears have come and gone. And they have taken with them the state baseball championship. They took*

*it Wednesday night through a weird assortment of hits, errors, jinxes and other sundry items which ultimately meant Bowie 3, Austin 2.*

After the Bears had packed up for the ride home, a few rocks hit their bus. “There were two cops there who didn’t do anything,” Rodriguez recalls. When a restaurant near Fort Stockton, 240 miles from home, wouldn’t serve the Bowie party, Herrera ferried food to the bus.

Around noon the following day, as the team rumbled along Highway 80 over the El Paso County line, a sheriff’s deputy on a motorcycle flashed his lights to pull the bus over. One player wondered if they’d hit somebody. When the officer stepped aboard, it was to inform the driver that Bowie students were affixing a STATE CHAMPS banner to the side of the bus and that he’d be providing a police escort to the terminal. “As the bus approached downtown there were people lining both sides of the street,” Lara recalls. “A lot of Anglos were cheering for us too.”

The minor league El Paso Texans threw a Bowie Night that weekend, and the Bears were feted with several banquets the following week. “We

can’t give them anything,” one city official told the local paper, “but we can sure feed them.”

Still, the Bears sensed that even in their hometown, they were given a second-class celebration. Instead of the mayor meeting them at the bus station, as had been announced, an alderman did the honors. “At the depot some guy came up to Nemo and gave him a box with a shirt in it,” Morales remembers. “When [El Paso’s] Austin High won the district in football, their coach got a brand new car.”

None of the players stopped by the terminal’s baggage room to claim luggage. “We all carried paper bags with our stuff off the bus,” Morales says. “I walked a mile, hopped the streetcar, then walked the eight blocks home.”

The night before the team had left for Austin, students in a Bowie home economics class stayed up late preparing hard-boiled eggs for the players to eat on the trip. The Bears had won, one of those coeds would say at a Bowie reunion years later, “*porque jugaron con huevos*.” Because they played with eggs—that is, with balls.

**S**ixty years would pass before another team from El Paso County claimed a state baseball title. In 2009, Socorro High, a school with a Hispanic enrollment of more than 95%, ventured to the Austin suburb of Round Rock to beat Austin Westlake and Lufkin for the Class 5A crown. Early in the semifinal a knot of Westlake supporters unfurled a Confederate flag, chanted “We speak English!” and waved their I.D.’s. “If we can have something like that in our day and age,” says Jesus Chavez, Bowie’s current principal and a former Socorro administrator, “I can’t even imagine what they went through in 1949.”



and claims adjusters and veterans, many of them decorated. An outsized number chose Nemoesque professions: teaching, educational administration, coaching.

Rocky Galarza, the old third baseman, put an open-air boxing ring behind his South Side tavern. He plucked kids off the streets, and if the streets pulled them back, as they briefly did eventual WBF lightweight champ Juan (Ernie) Lazcano, Galarza would simply wait until they returned, wiser, to the sanctuary of his ring. The best ones ultimately made their way to L.A. or Dallas or Houston, where someone else cashed in on them; Galarza, in cowboy boots and jeans, his black hair flowing as he worked a guy out, simply turned to the next kid to save. One night in 1997 one of Galarza’s barmaids shot and killed him in his sleep. Seven years later, on the eve of a title fight in Las Vegas, Lazcano told Bill Knight of the *El Paso Times*, “Sometimes, when I’m asleep, I still see him, still hear him. He’s telling me, ‘Come on, Champ, don’t give up. Feint. Don’t just stand there. Move your feet.’ It’s nice to know, isn’t it, that if you do something special for people the way Rocky did, that you live on through them?”

→ **STILL HERE**  
From left:  
former Bears  
Sambrano,  
Carlos Macias,  
Morales and  
Jose Corona  
at Bowie’s  
baseball field.

Andy Morales, the license-plate-spotting second baseman, also “went Nemo,” as the old Bears put it. After winning a football scholarship to New Mexico and serving in Korea with the Navy, he became baseball coach at El Paso’s Austin High. There, in the early ’70s, he taught the game to an Anglo kid named Chris Forbes, who grew up to coach Socorro to that 2009 state title. Morales followed the Bulldogs as they made a familiar way east through the draw, to Midland and greater Austin, as excited as he had been as a

Bowie Bear. He was amazed that a dozen spirit buses would make the trip from El Paso for the final.

As for Herrera himself, he remained at Bowie until 1960. “The [Bowie] boys knew little of fundamentals,” he said upon leaving, “and I was told I couldn’t teach them. But I did.” He took a post at another barrio high school, Edgewood of San Antonio. After one year Herrera—by now known as *el viejo*, the old man—returned to El Paso to coach baseball at Coronado High, a new, largely Anglo school on the outskirts of town. “I couldn’t get those guys to do a damn thing,” he would say. “They had a car in the parking lot and a gal on their arm.”

Upon reaching the mandatory retirement age of 70, he returned one last time to San Antonio, working as director of civilian recreation at Kelly Air Force Base for 10 years before retiring again. He died in 1984. Herrera remains the only Texas high school coach to have won state titles in two sports, and his name can be found throughout the barrios of the two cities: on a scholarship fund, an elementary school and a baseball field in El Paso; and on a scholarship fund, a basketball court and the Kelly Air Force Base civilian rec center in San Antonio. “It’s almost a competition between the two cities to see who can honor Nemo the most,” says his son Charles, 75.

Of the eight members of the 1949 Bowie Bears still living, the five in El Paso gather for breakfast every few months at a Mexican restaurant on the East Side. Listen in, and you’ll hear the sounds of baseball: chatter, needling, kibitzing, stories that reach across the years and often involve their old coach. Not that it matters particularly, but the banter is much more likely to be in English than in Spanish. And just so you know, Morales says, “For 60 years we’ve never lost a conversation.” □

## FIELDING AUSTIN’S LAST GROUNDER, RODRIGUEZ SAID, “THIS DAMN BALL’S NOT GOING THROUGH ME.”

A month after their victory the Socorro players visited Bowie to present championship rings—not awarded in 1949—to the eight surviving Bears. A new Bowie High sits on an old melon field that in ’49 was part of Mexico but in 1963 passed into the U.S. as part of the Chamizal Settlement between the two countries.

If the borderland remains its protean self, in one respect it’s as hard as a barrier can be: While Juárez becomes an ever more Hobbesian hell of drug violence, in which more than 8,000 people have been murdered over the past three years, El Paso remains virtually immune. Bowie nonetheless serves the second-poorest zip code in the U.S. The annual median income in the Segundo Barrio languishes below \$20,000, and 68.8% of the children in Bowie’s catchment area are considered at risk. Chavez says, “This school is about facing adversity, moving forward and beating the odds.”

The 1949 Bears and their young counterparts from Socorro gathered near the commemorative display in Bowie’s Fine Arts Building, where a visitor can punch up audio of Nemo Herrera’s collect calls back to KTSM Radio. The 400 people on hand included Peter Contreras, assistant athletic director of the state’s University Interscholastic League, the high school sanctioning body that hadn’t seen fit to properly lodge or honor the Bears 60 years earlier. That Contreras is Hispanic is only one of uncountable examples of how times have changed. As for the old slights, the ’49ers were “always very restrained how they responded,” says Reyes Mata, the South Side native who helped organize the event. “They always maintained their dignity.”

What did they become, Nemo Herrera’s barrio boys from El Paso and San Antonio? Judges and produce barons and big-city postmasters. Mechanics and firefighters and civil servants. Opticians