

# MURDER AT THE SLEEPY LAGOON

**ZOOT SUITS, RACE, & RIOT IN WARTIME L.A.**

*Eduardo Obregón Pagán*



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**EDUARDO OBRECÓN PACÁN**

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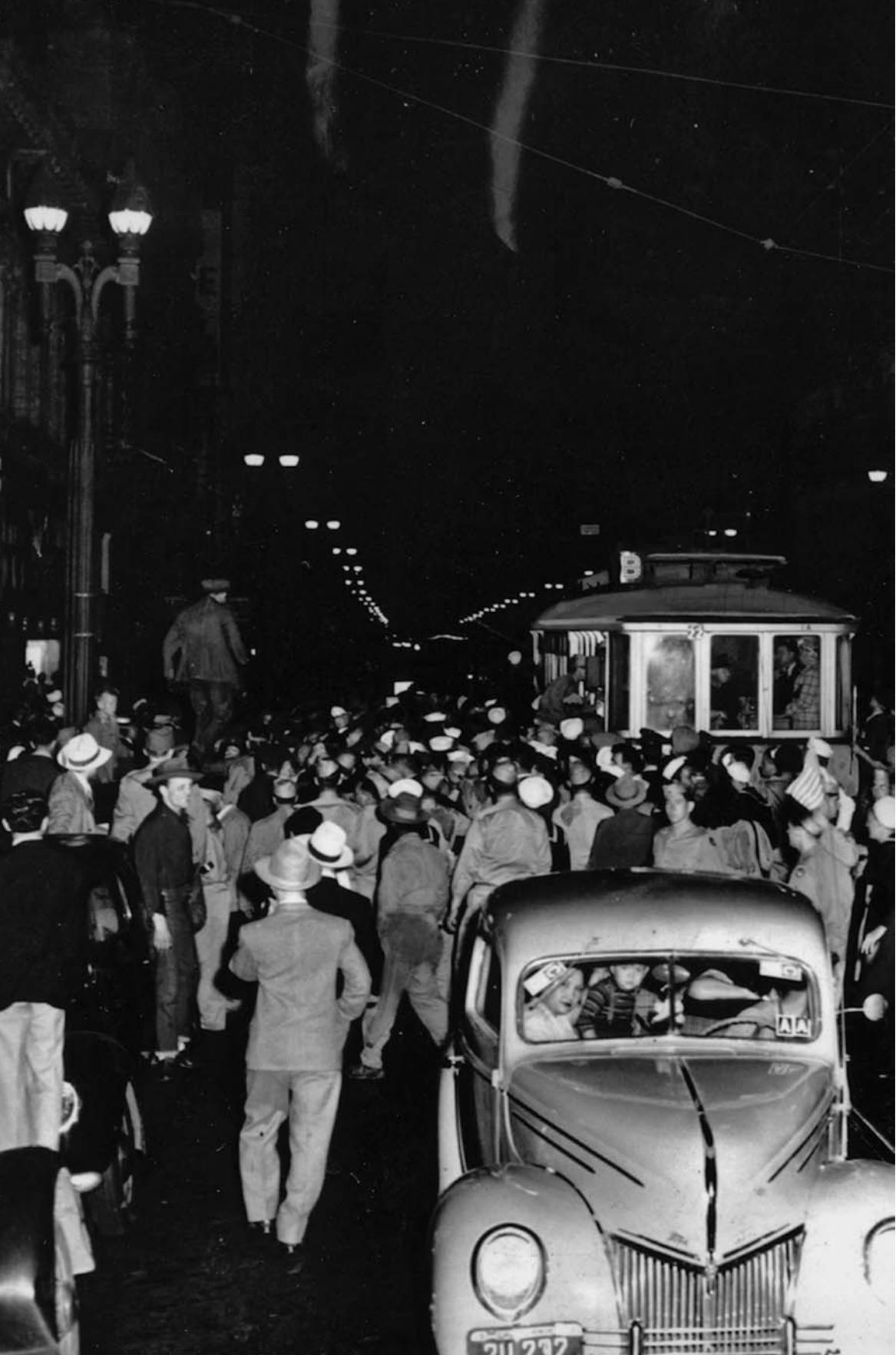
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**MURDER  
AT THE  
SLEEPY  
LAGOON**





## Prologue : The Sleepy Lagoon Mystery

*Dies irae, dies illa calamitatis et miseriae;  
dies magna et amara valde.*

Day of wrath, this day of calamity and misery;  
a great and bitter day.

**T**he blows cracked hard against his head and body, bruising him like someone had picked up a two-by-four and flailed against him mercilessly.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-two-year-old José Díaz tried to duck under his lean arms to shield himself from the punishing beating, but he could feel his strength slipping away. He struggled to defend himself, punching into the dark night at the men who surrounded him, but his aim was bad. Fear surging through his mind caused him to swing wildly, and he was almost too drunk to keep his balance. He hit someone, though, three or four times, hard enough to skin his knuckles and break his finger.

What did they want? Why had he ever come to this party? He had told his mother earlier that evening that he had a strange feeling about going. His neighbors, Amelio and Angela Delgadillo, had spent weeks preparing their small shack for the birthday of their twenty-year-old daughter, Eleanor Delgadillo Coronado.<sup>2</sup> The Delgadillo and Díaz families were friends and lived about a hundred yards away from each other in bunkhouses clustered around a small pond, where Italian, Chinese, and Mexican farm workers made their homes on the Williams Ranch in rural Los Angeles County.<sup>3</sup> Several weeks earlier friends and neighbors had helped the Delgadillos pour a slab of cement on the patio, and they were eager to put it to good use dancing and eating good food on Saturday night, 1 August 1942.

José was one of the invited guests, and although he was not normally one to attend parties, this was his last weekend at home, and this party would be the last time he would see his friends and neighbors. Because he was born in Mexico, he was not subject to the draft, but he felt it was his duty to fight on behalf of his adopted country, and he was to report to the army recruitment center for his induction the following Monday. After confiding

his uneasiness about attending the party to his mother, he walked down the footpath along the pond that led to the Delgadillos' home.<sup>4</sup>

José rarely drank, but on this night he accepted the free-flowing beer offered from friends and co-workers at the party.<sup>5</sup> By one o'clock in the morning the dance orchestra had packed up and left the celebration. So, too, had most of the guests, including José in the company of a couple of men. The Delgadillo girls wanted to continue dancing, so they moved their Victrola radio onto the patio and tuned in to a music program.<sup>6</sup> Victoria Delgadillo began dancing with Dominic Manfredi, and Josephine Delgadillo Reyes, nicknamed "Lola," danced with her husband, Cruz.<sup>7</sup> The parents turned their attention to cleaning up the house, and a small cluster of young men gathered outside the fence, smoking cigarettes.

José began to weave his way home, drunk and feeling a bit ill. But when he was far enough away from the Delgadillos' single porch light to be hidden in the shadows of the tall trees and shrubbery, he was viciously attacked. José withstood several blows to his face with fists and to his arms and head with a club. He finally collapsed face forward onto the road when someone stabbed him twice in the stomach with an ice pick.<sup>8</sup>

José was found about thirty minutes later. His swollen eyes were half open, and blood gurgled in his throat as he breathed. He was bleeding profusely from his left ear and through his shirt around his upper abdomen. His pockets had been turned inside out. A neighbor ran to arouse José's younger brother Lino from bed, who awakened and rushed to find his mortally wounded brother surrounded by the Delgadillos, Coronados, and others.<sup>9</sup> In the distance someone ran off to call an ambulance.

An hour and a half after José Díaz entered Los Angeles General Hospital, he quietly died, without regaining consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

The following Monday morning, the city of Los Angeles learned of Díaz's death through an unassuming report about weekend violence printed on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. This was not the first time that tales of violence from the Eastside found their way into the Los Angeles newspapers, and both the positioning and the tenor of the report reflected the attitudes that many Angelenos held toward Mexicans in the United States. The story of José's death made front-page news, but only as part of a larger story about an unusually heavy weekend of street brawls in East Los Angeles. The tone of reporting revealed concern over growing violence in Los Angeles but did not suggest any particular alarm at one more Mexican casualty.

The public at large in Los Angeles had a history of holding a complicated set of views toward Mexico and its citizens. Southern Californians in general tended to value facets of Mexican culture that were good for ambience

and for tourism and the hard work that they could command for paying “Mexican wages” to racialized nonwhite laborers. But at the time of Díaz’s death, the echo had barely quieted from the previous decade, when white Californians called for the mass deportations of Mexican refugees and their American-born spouses and children in order to save the state from having to provide relief to unemployed immigrants during the Great Depression.<sup>11</sup> This reactionary refrain of the 1930s, of course, followed on the earlier cant of Americanization in the 1920s, when armies of social workers, educators, and philanthropists in Los Angeles fought against the imagined danger of cultural diversity that Mexican expatriates threatened in failing to embrace American values and lifestyles quickly enough.

In late 1942, the governor’s office sent a memo to the law enforcement agencies of Los Angeles County ordering them to crack down on street violence and youth gangs. As a result, what ordinarily would have been a routine police investigation of the death of José Díaz skyrocketed in political significance for the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office. The Los Angeles Police Department launched a much publicized war on juvenile delinquency and turned the investigation into a major media event. In the months that followed, Californians would again revive the discourse on “the Mexican problem” and debate whether Mexican citizens and their American-born children were culturally, politically, intellectually, and biologically capable of living within a white, civilized, democratic society.

The outcry in editorials and letters to the editor that followed the growing press coverage of the investigation was as swift as it was angry over the problem of juvenile delinquency in Los Angeles. But the cries for justice came not so much because Díaz or his peers personally meant something to those who called for a strong police showing against juvenile gangs. Had he survived his wounds, José would have remained, in all likelihood, virtually invisible to the public. Instead, his death represented a horrible truth that the white reading public would rather not recognize: the sometimes violent and often unforgiving “City of Angels.”

In the weeks that followed the death of José Díaz, the LAPD conducted mass dragnets throughout the neighborhoods of Los Angeles, targeting those areas heavily populated by Mexican Americans and African Americans. More than six hundred young men and women were taken into custody as a result, and the Los Angeles press hailed the police as heroes. Shortly thereafter, through their often brutal interrogations of adolescent youths, the police proudly announced that they had found those responsible for José’s death—the young people of 38th Street.

But were they?



**PART I**  
**MAKE NOISE**  
**BROKEN WINDOWS**

