

Excerpts involving Joaquín Murrieta Park taken from **El Rio For The People! A community's successful struggle to empower itself: A personal Memoir**

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El Rio Protestors (Chicanos) March to El Rio from Tully School, August 22, 1970

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Major players in the creation of Joaquín Murrieta Park

The movement that created Joaquín Murrieta Park, “El Rio for the People,” led by the El Rio Coalition and the Centro Chicano, erupted in 1970, but the seeds for it were planted in 1967, when a commitment to build a park and neighborhood center on the west side of Tucson was made by City Council candidates seeking support.

Barrios Hollywood, El Rio, and the El Rio Golf Course and Country Club (ERCC), were the major players in the historic political dynamics described herein.

About the barrios:

Geographically, Barrio Hollywood is bounded by Speedway Blvd. on the north and St. Mary’s Rd. on the south. The western boundary is Silverbell Rd., and the eastern boundary is the Santa Cruz River. Hollywood’s “Main” street is Grande Ave., which runs north and south from Speedway to St. Mary’s Rd.

Barrio El Rio is north of Speedway Blvd. and partially wraps around the golf course.

According to University of Arizona scholar Tom Sheridan, 69.9% of the residences in Barrio Hollywood were owned by individuals with Spanish surnames. Given its makeup, the same percentage of Spanish-surnamed home ownership was probably true of Barrio El Rio. But

because it relies on Spanish surnames, this percentage is an undercount – many Mexican American families with English surnames lived in the barrios. By 1970, when the El Rio controversy occurred, approximately 10,000 people were living in the Hollywood-El Rio area, according to City figures.

The people said, “We need a park.”

The streets in both barrios were unpaved, and neither barrio had sidewalks. There was no park in the area – the empty lots and the streets were the children’s playground.

In 1967, the barrio residents met with the City Council candidates, emphasizing that their top priority for the area was a park where families could gather for picnics and the kids could play.

The candidates made a commitment: if elected, they would work to build a park and neighborhood center to serve the Hollywood/El Rio area, and they were receptive to the idea of purchasing the El Rio Golf Course and Country Club (ERCC) for that purpose.

Excited about the promise of a park, barrio residents registered voters and campaigned in support of the Democratic slate. I grew up in Barrio Hollywood and also participated in this campaign. Two of the candidates for whom we campaigned won, maintaining a Democratic majority on the Council.

The barrio residents, believing that the much-needed park and community center were soon to become a reality, felt a sense of accomplishment.

El Rio Golf Course and Country Club

Established in 1929, the private El Rio Golf Course and Country Club (ERCC), located between Barrios El Rio and Hollywood, was a well-tended 18-hole golf course, with a lake, a restaurant/bar, and a pro shop, on 122 acres of land.

In the late 1960s, Randolph Golf Course, Tucson’s only municipal golf course at the time, could not accommodate any more golfers, which led the City to purchase the ERCC.

The “War on Poverty” and the Chicano Movement get into the act...

Political activism that was percolating on Tucson’s west side played a key role in the creation of Joaquín Murrieta Park.

One aspect of this political activism emanated from President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” initiative. The “El Rio for The People” movement was initiated by the Manzo Area Council (MAC), a “War on Poverty” agency located in Barrio Hollywood. Headed by Alberto Sánchez, the MAC focused on “older” barrio residents and helped register them to vote.

Young Chicano/a activists involved in the emerging Chicano Movement also played a key role in the El Rio Movement, viz.:

The Young Mexican American Association (YMAA), led by 27-year-old Barrio Hollywood resident Frankie Wood, lobbied City officials and business owners to hire Mexican Americans and fought the local school district with regard to practices such as punishing children for speaking Spanish on school grounds, and lobbied the City to make improvements at Oury Park in Barrio Anita.

The Centro Chicano, founded by 26-year-old Barrio Hollywood resident and University of Arizona student Salomón Baldenegro, fought discriminatory policies and practices of businesses and public entities. Both youth-oriented groups operated out of the Centro Chicano on Melrose Ave. in Barrio Hollywood.

This burgeoning barrio political activity among older (MAC) and younger (YMAA, Centro Chicano) barrio residents was a major factor in the city-barrio fight that took place in Tucson in 1970.

The City buys the ERCC, denies its commitment...

The City bought the El Rio Golf Course and Country Club (ERCC) in January 1968. Barrio residents, led by the Manzo Area Council (MAC), met with the Mayor and City Council members, reminding them of the commitment to build a park and neighborhood center on a portion of the ERCC. The politicians denied that there was ever any commitment to convert any part of the ERCC into a park or center. Héctor Morales, a member of the City Council when the City purchased the ERCC, contradicted the Mayor and Council members, stating that when the City bought the ERCC, the intention was to build a park and neighborhood center on part of the ERCC.

In February 1970, in response to the barrio residents' pressure, City Manager Roger O'Mara presented a proposal to the Mayor and Council to convert the old ERCC clubhouse, located on the southeast corner of the golf course, which was not in use at the time, into a neighborhood center. The Mayor and Council voted down O'Mara's proposal.

El pleito (The fight) begins...

The rejection of O'Mara's proposal was not well received by the MAC, which held a series of meetings involving several barrios – Hollywood, El Rio, Pascua, Anita, and John Spring – to discuss the situation. This resulted in the formation of “The Committee for the Neighborhood Community Center,” which kept up the pressure campaign.

The pressure campaign led the City to propose, in March 1970, establishing a west side community center on some land just east of the ERCC. This proposal was rejected by both the City Council and the resident committee.

The City then proposed another plan, which called for building the community center in the middle of Barrio Hollywood, on Ontario Street, across from Manzo School. This entailed condemning and tearing down three to five family residences, which was seen as disrespectful and as a value judgment. The convenience of outsiders (tourists, ERCC members) was more important to the City than the homes of Chicano families.

These events led to the founding, in May 1970, of the El Rio Coalition (ERC) by several families from barrios Hollywood and El Rio. At that initial meeting, it was decided that a more aggressive approach was called for. In June 1970, the Chicano youth activist groups discussed above were invited to join the ERC.

During the first part of June 1970, the ERC conducted a petition drive in the barrios of El Rio and Hollywood. The petition requested that the City honor its commitment to build a park and community center at the ERCC and that the City convert the old El Rio clubhouse into a community center. Over 2,000 petition signatures were gathered and submitted to the City Council.

Again, we were ignored.



Protestors begin their march led by the El Rio Coalition, August 15, 1970

From the Jack Shaeffer photograph collection, courtesy of Special Collections, The University of Arizona Libraries

The takeover of the golf course...

The El Rio Coalition's first public demonstration was on Saturday, August 15, 1970. About 400-500 people marched from St. Margaret's Church to the golf course and rallied in the golf course parking lot.

The great majority of the marchers were from barrios Hollywood and El Rio, although there were supporters from other parts of town. A delegation from the Old Pascua Yaqui Village was led by a 70-year-old tribal elder. We were gratified to see a sizable contingent of Anglo and Black supporters and clergy members marching with us. Several lawyers were on hand in case legal issues arose.

For many of the people in the march that morning – parents, grandparents, children – this was the first time they had been involved in a protest march.

Although this was not planned, at the end of the speeches, some people walked onto the golf course, and everybody followed. We then took over the golf course, as the golfers left, and we had a picnic.

On August 22, 1970, we took over the golf course again– this time, there were more than 600 of us.

From that point on, police in riot gear were stationed at the gate of the golf course and prevented us from entering. Until January 1971, a picket/demonstration was held every Saturday, and sometimes on Sundays and weekdays, at the golf course. We picketed in the 110-degree summer days, in the rain during the monsoon season, and in the cold of the winter months.

Once, in September 1970, because we were prevented by police from entering the golf course, we took over Speedway Blvd., from Cuesta Ave. to Grande Ave., and held a community picnic on the street. In December 1970, we did a sleepover outside the golf course.

We also picketed City Hall. Our base expanded as we received support from various churches, organizations, and people from throughout the city.

We never wavered in our demand that the City keep its word and build a park on the west side.

Behind the scenes, there were negotiation meetings between City officials and El Rio Coalition members. I was involved in these negotiations.

Then we were arrested...

There were two instances in which some of us, including me, were arrested:

The first incident occurred on Sunday, September 13, 1970, when several of us visited the ERCC coffee shop and ordered coffee, only to be refused service. Contending that the coffee shop was now a public facility, having been acquired by the City through the ERCC, we refused to leave. The police were called, and we were arrested for trespassing.

That evening, over 100 people participated in a candlelight march and picket at the golf course. As we picketed, policemen hiding in the bushes pointed shotguns at us. We picketed until midnight. On September 16, about 200 of us held another candlelight picket and a prayer service.

The second instance was on Saturday, September 19, 1970. Six of us, including myself and my brother Martín, were arrested for “obstructing justice” and for “loud and profane language” when we objected to one of our members being arrested for making an illegal U-turn. (The chokehold the police used on me and Martín is now prohibited by the Tucson Police Department.)

We were acquitted in court. The judge referred to us as “martyrs” fighting a righteous cause.

Negotiations continue, and the issue is resolved...

Even as the above events unfolded, behind-the-scenes negotiations were underway between the Coalition (comprising both young and old factions) and the City. I was involved in these negotiations. Finally, in early 1971, an accord was reached:

A neighborhood center would be built on the site of the old ERCC clubhouse and parking lot, and a park would be established on acreage owned by the City west of the golf course.

The Coalition insisted on being involved in the planning of the neighborhood center’s layout and features, as well as the park’s, and also in the selection of the architects who would draw up the plans for these.

And that’s how Joaquin Murrieta Park (and the El Rio Neighborhood Center) came to be.

The neighborhood center opened in 1972, and the park opened in 1973.

“El Rio for the People”: A defining moment

The 1970 “El Rio for the People” movement in Tucson was a defining moment in the political evolution of Tucson’s Mexican American/Chicano community. It showed the power of Chicano activism and political organizing in the barrios, and proved that a well-planned, disciplined, multigenerational, and committed effort can “beat city hall.”