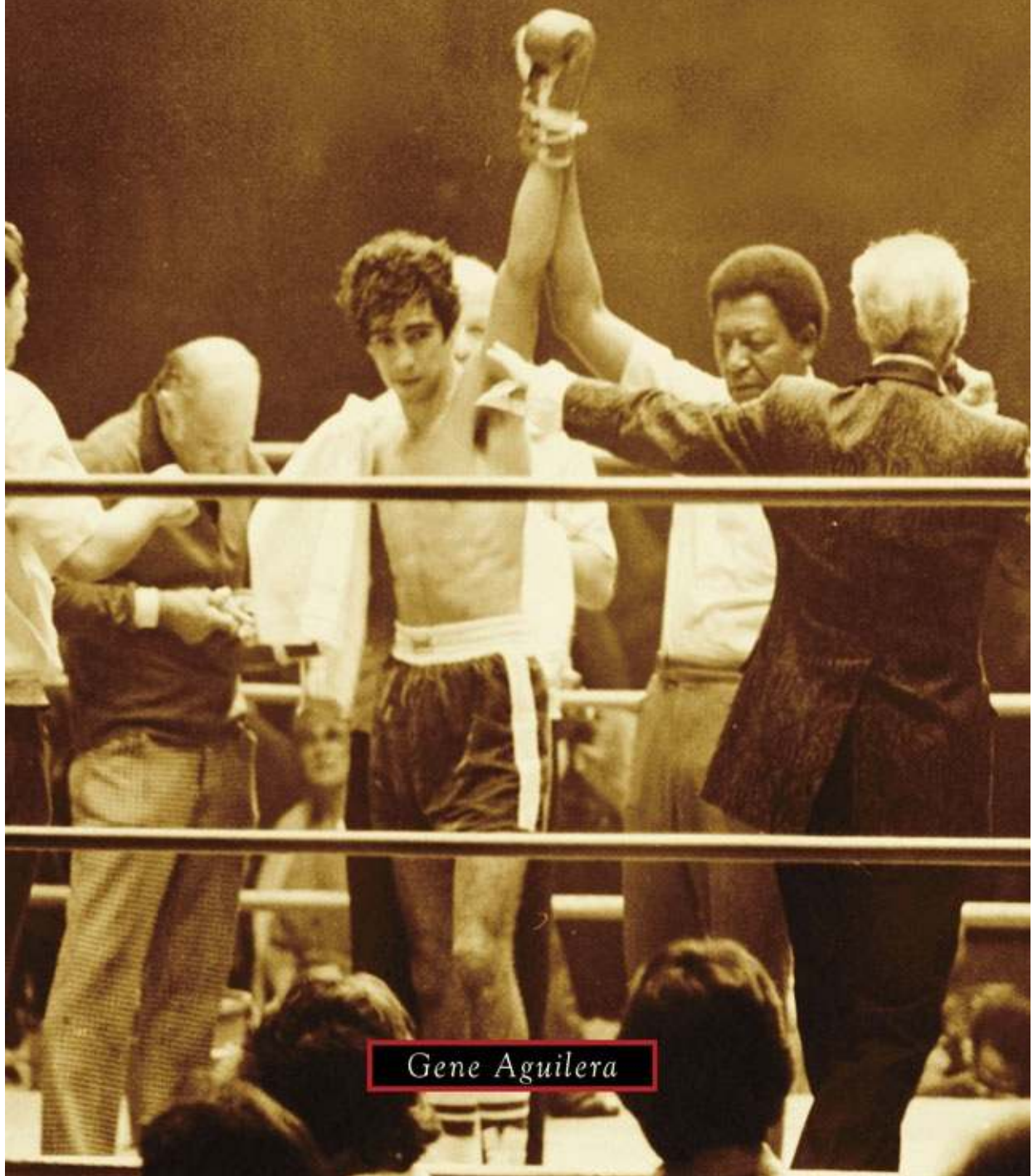


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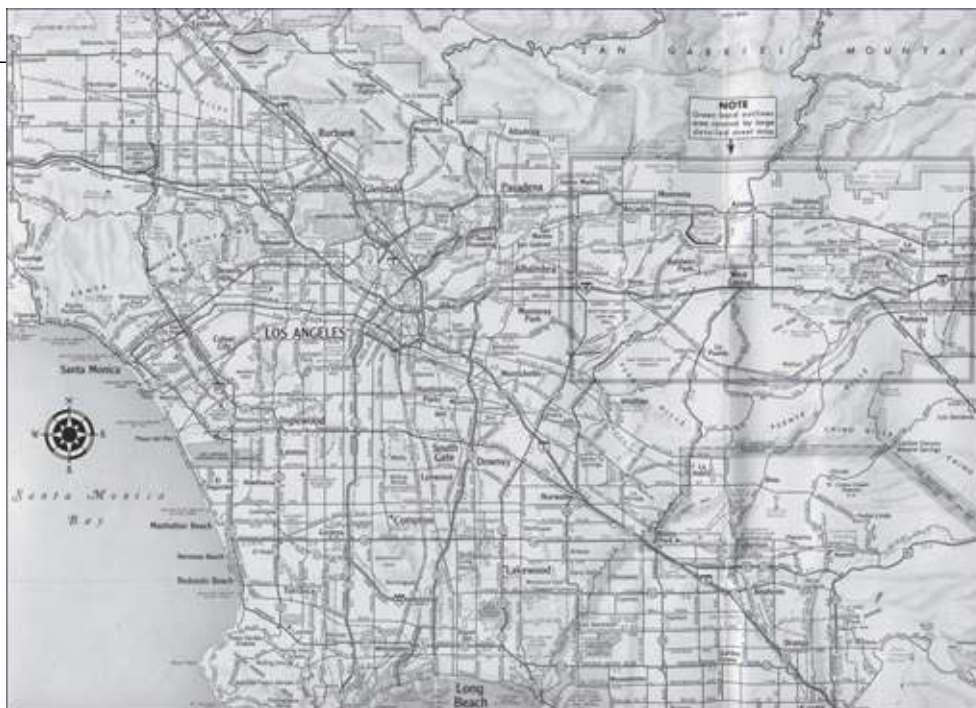
MEXICAN AMERICAN
BOXING IN LOS ANGELES



Gene Aguilera

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MEXICAN AMERICAN
BOXING IN LOS ANGELES



This 1962 map covers the Greater Los Angeles area, where the majority of boxers in this book trained, fought, and lived. Downtown Los Angeles was the home of the Olympic Auditorium and Main Street Gym, making Southern California fertile ground for some of the best fighters that ever stepped in the ring.

ON THE COVER: This image shows young Mexican American boxer Herman “Kid” Montes in only his eighth fight at the Olympic Auditorium. It also captures the underlying emotions and drama that can occur inside the ring. Sponsor Bob Castillo (far left) took Montes as far as possible and was being replaced by new manager Bennie Georgino (behind Montes), father/trainer John Montes Sr. (second from left) worked his son’s corner, and referee John Thomas (second from right) raises Montes’s arm signifying victory. (Author’s collection.)

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MEXICAN AMERICAN
BOXING IN LOS ANGELES

Gene Aguilera



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*This book is dedicated with forever love to my daughters Emily Aguilera
and Melanie Aguilera, also to my “Mama” Carmen Aguilera and Aunt
Maggie Cano.*

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INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago while cleaning out my garage, I found a scrapbook my family had bought for me at Disneyland back in 1961. While looking through this personal gem, I saw all the things that were important to me as a young boy. Throughout my early years, I had cut and glued pictures of all my favorite Los Angeles sports teams (Dodgers, Angels, Rams, and Lakers), the British Invasion musical groups (Beatles, Dave Clark Five, Searchers, Gerry and the Pacemakers), and monster hot rod builder Ed “Big Daddy” Roth.

But tucked away on one of the pages were two pictures with captions that read “Champion Cassius Clay” and “Sonny Liston.” There it was—I needed no more proof. When Clay (Ali) first beat Liston for the world heavyweight title in 1964, I was 10 years old and boxing was flowing through my veins.

My intention with this book is to capture the colorful, flamboyant, and wonderful world of *Mexican American Boxing in Los Angeles*. From the minute they step into the ring, Mexican American fighters have electrified fans with their explosiveness and courage. Their big hearts provide for sensational ring wars—never a dull moment here, folks. Don’t go buy a beer, because by the time you get back the fight might be over! Local Los Angeles Mexican American boxers, such as Bobby Chacon and Frankie Duarte, knew that to give a punch, they had to take a punch.

You read about boxing in the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. You saw the gorgeous “floating head” boxing posters on the telephone poles. You went to the Olympic Auditorium to root for your favorite fighter. Chicano boxers rubbing elbows with Hollywood celebrities—it was a sociological culture all of its own. Fans idolized and shrewd promoters drooled over these Mexican American boxers that dominated the battle every second of every round. And if the fight ended in a knockout? Well, that’s even better. This type of aggressive boxing obviously made it easier for Los Angeles promoters, like Aileen Eaton and Don Fraser, to pack ‘em in, giving the fans their money’s worth.

To a boxing fan, it is the greatest sport in the world. A boxer is an isolated gladiator in the ring, no teammates to help out, only your opponent stands in front of you. Promoter George Parnassus said, “In boxing it is one man by himself, against one man, all alone. That is what it comes down to, does it not to know which man is best?” An understated irony is that one minute you are at war and the next minute you are hugging like best of friends, like turning off a light switch.

It’s sportsmanship at its highest degree. Boxing is a sport of technique, skill, and wit. It can provide scientific boxing vs. brute strength in sports’ purest form of competition. To quote musician Ruben Cooder from his CD *Chavez Ravine*, “The Olympic Auditorium, downtown, was the top-of-the-line venue for East L.A. fighters in those days. But your life can change at the end of one punch.” Like a good novella with highs and lows, twists and turns, you can’t shake loose from the sport. Prefight hype can swallow you up, sometimes making the buildup better than the bout itself. But, ultimately, the relationship between boxers and fans is closer than any other sport.

From saving newspaper clippings of my favorite Mexican American boxers to hanging out at the Main St. Gym, from listening to bar talk of fans arguing who’s the best to watching Saturday night fights on Channel 34 from Mexico, and from going to the Olympic Auditorium and the Fabulous Forum to the bright lights of Las Vegas, I have, unknowingly, been preparing all my life to write this book. It is a blessing to make a yearly pilgrimage to the holy land of boxing, the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, New York, accompanying the greatest bantamweight of all time, Rube Olivares.

One cannot ignore the immense contributions of boxers that came from Mexico, and they must be integrated within the fiber of this book. Many Mexican-born fighters crossed over at an early age, made the Los Angeles area their home, and became local stars to the Mexican American public. The popularity and success of boxers from Mexico goes hand in hand with *Mexican American Boxing in Los Angeles*; one cannot exist without the other.

With the burgeoning Mexican population in the Los Angeles area, it's no surprise that warriors from south of the border migrated north for their fame and fortune. They engaged in some of the most exciting and entertaining boxing matches ever to take place in Los Angeles while instilling pride in the hearts of the growing Southland Latino community. Perhaps the greatest fight I ever saw live was "The Battle of the Zs," the Carlos Zarate–Alfonso Zamora bombs-away war at the Forum in 1977.

The historical legacy of Los Angeles boxing will forever be tied in with the epic showdowns between tough, game Mexican American boxers against beloved Mexican ring idols—together bringing in huge gate-drawing power. Slugfests such as Herman Montes (US) vs. Pipino Cuevas (MEX) and Bobby Chacon (US) vs. Ruben Olivares (MEX) come to mind, providing a heartfelt international flavor that was enticing to fans from both sides of the border.

Mexican American boxing fans are loyal to the end. Their love and embrace of a hometown hero never fades away. A new world champion instinctively carried himself with a noble aura that parlayed into a celebrity status in town. There were real neighborhood rivalries that existed and it was barrio vs. barrio to protect your turf. From Chavez Ravine, you had Carlos Chavez and Vince Delgado. The poster read "Harbor vs. Maravilla" when Chicano icon Mando Ramos fought Ruben Navarro. "Schoolboy" Bobby Chacon represented the San Fernando Valley, and from the "Big Hazard" garage you had Eddie "The Animal" Lopez and Joey Olivo. The nicknames were just as fabulous as the fighters themselves: "Little Red" Lopez, "King" Carlos, Armando "The Man," and "Superfly" Sandoval, just to name a few.

There was a romantic notion surrounding *the golden age* of boxing in Los Angeles during the 1940s and 1950s. Los Angeles was a hotbed of boxing back then. Local matchmaker Hap Navarro fondly remembered, "Los Angeles, one of the world's greatest boxing cities, has probably developed more sensational box-office attractions than any other city," and boxing beat writer John Beyroote recalled the days "when Los Angeles was truly a fight town." A central figure to the story is "Golden Boy" Armand Aragon. Like a winding thread, Aragon bobs and weaves throughout the book. Aragon's heart was always occupy a huge section of the Olympic Auditorium. He may never have made it to a world title but he was the Olympic box office champion of the 1950s.

This is not meant to be the definitive picture book on Mexican American boxing in Los Angeles. It is physically impossible to mention every boxer of Mexican descent who laced up gloves in the Greater Los Angeles area. But what we have attempted to do, through the world of pictures, is capture the spirit and keep the legacy alive of the many great Mexican American fighters who did battle in the ring for their families, friends, and neighborhoods. And as we know, every picture tells a story.

Now shake hands and come out fighting.

THE 1990s–1930s

THERE WAS MURDER IN HIS EYES

He could hit as hard as Jim Jeffries although he was only a lightweight. He landed one of his famous punches that almost tore the top of my head off. I have never been hit as hard before or since. I turned a complete somersault and fell flat on my back. I looked up and saw Herrera standing over me with murder in his eyes. That happened in the fifth round. Around the 17th round my head cleared . . . but I could not recall anything that happened in those 12 rounds. I really think Herrera was the greatest man I met.

—Battling Nelson, world lightweight champion, describing his fight with Aurelio Herrera
September 5, 1904, bout with Aurelio Herrera

Before he became a boxer, Aurelio Herrera was one of the best card dealers in a wild little town way out west known as Bakersfield, California. However, Herrera's reputation of having heavy fists quickly became the talk of the gambling house. Herrera's knockout exploits soon cut a path in the Northwest and, eventually, across the United States while carrying the shield for all hard-drinking boxers. Herrera displayed a cold confidence and disinterested air that bothered his opponents. He should be remembered as Southern California's first boxing Latino superstar.

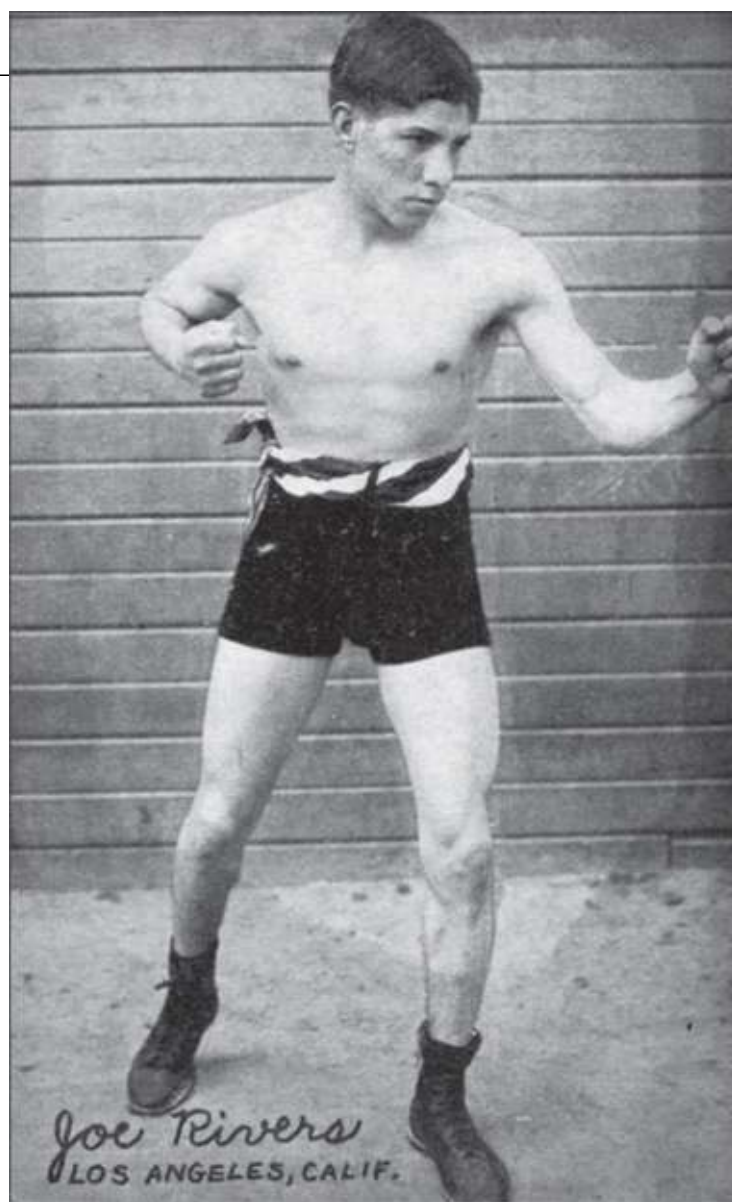
Featherweight "Baby" Arizmendi's signature victory over all-time boxing great Henry Armstrong on November 4, 1934, is described in a newspaper account: "Arizmendi's superior boxing and effective body punching enabled him to win almost every round . . . Fighting with a broken left wrist from the second round, Arizmendi gave one of the most courageous exhibitions in Mexican ring history."

There were tales of oddities from the Wild West era, such as police stoppages of bouts when a boxer became hopelessly hurt, 20-round fights, imposter opponents, and boxing matches being declared "no contest" because of lack of action or stalling from the combatants. Then there were the "newspaper decisions," meaning if there was no knockout or clear-cut winner by the fight's conclusion, the bout was officially declared a "no decision." However, newspaper reporters seated ringside would decide their own "winner" and print their results the following day.



Aurelio Herrera was one of the hardest-hitting lightweight boxers ever and a trailblazer for Mexican American fighters of his era. He is seen below at right in his 1904 bout with Battling Nelson. Fighting out of Bakersfield, Herrera inflicted true terror into the hearts of his opponents. Herrera began his career in 1895, frequently fought at Los Angeles boxing venues, and retired in 1909 with a record of 66 wins (59 knockouts), 12 losses, and 14 draws. It was said that he hit as hard as a safe, “but he liked wine, women, and long-black cigars better than ring fame,” according to an article in *Boxing and Wrestling* magazine. Herrera was described by fellow boxers as the greatest one-punch knockout artist ever seen and won the featherweight championship of the Northwest on February 5, 1903, with a 10th round TKO over Kid Oglesby at the Grand Theatre in Butte, Montana. On May 29, 1901, Herrera was knocked out in the fifth round in his only attempt at the world title by featherweight champion “Terrible” Terry McGovern at Mechanic’s Pavilion in San Francisco. After the fight, Herrera mysteriously claimed he was doped by one of his seconds.





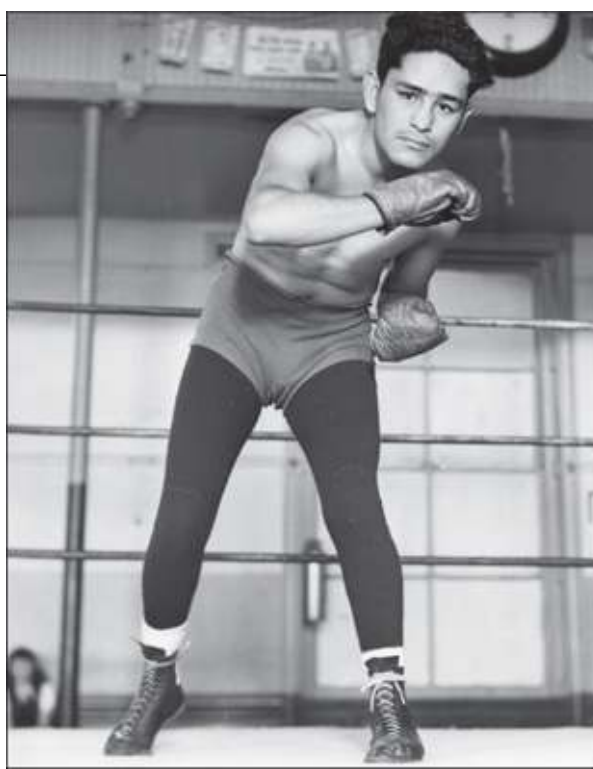
“Mexican” Joe Rivers, born Jose Ybarra in Los Angeles, was a lightning-quick lightweight boxer who fought from 1908 to 1924, ending with a record of 38 wins (20 knockouts), 24 losses, and 13 draws. On a big drawing card at the Vernon Arena, Rivers claimed the world featherweight title with a 13th-round TKO over Joe Coster on July 4, 1911. Rivers was a flashy character who drove a new Simplex touring car and sported expensive rings. On July 4, 1912, Rivers fought champion Ad Wolgast of Michigan for the world’s lightweight title in front of a full house at the Vernon Arena. In one of the most controversial decisions in boxing history, both fighters landed a rare simultaneous double knockdown in the 13th round with Wolgast proceeding to fall on top of Rivers. Referee Jack Welch, who was handpicked by Wolgast, began an abbreviated count on Rivers while helping Wolgast up and declared him the winner by knockout. After the fight, bedlam ensued with referee Welch running for his life.



Bert Colima possessed an elegant fighting style that helped him capture the Pacific Coast middleweight championship in 1924 and the Mexican national welterweight title in 1928. In a career that spanned from 1919 to 1933, “The Whittier Bearcat,” born Epifanio Romero in the Los Nietos neighborhood of West Whittier, was the most popular Mexican American boxing attraction at Jack Doyle’s Vernon Arena, located at Thirty-eighth and Santa Fe Avenue. He changed his last name to Colima (in honor of his grandmother’s hometown in Mexico) at the convincing of his manager. Colima was a top-ranked welterweight contender who fought all the way to the light heavyweight division, ending with a record of 144 wins (55 knockouts), 37 losses, and 22 draws. Below, Colima (right) poses in the ring with an unidentified heavyweight boxer in 1928.



Bert Colima (right) squares off against ace welterweight champion Mickey Walker “The Bulldog” (left) for their nontitle tiff at the Vernon Arena on February 24, 1925. When Walker (with heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey, far left, holding coat) dropped “The Whittier Flash” in the seventh round, Dutch Meyers (Colima’s manager) applied smelling salts to his downed fighter during referee Harry Lee’s count. Colima was promptly disqualified and an angry protest ensued.



Los Angeles–born Richie Lemos was a southpaw featherweight boxer who won the NBA world featherweight title with a fifth-round knockout over defending champion Petey Scalzo of New York at the Olympic Auditorium on July 1, 1941. After the fight, Lemos was greeted with a hug and kiss in the ring by popular Mexican film actress Lupe Velez. Lemos fought from 1937 to 1943, ending with a record of 55 victories (26 knockouts), 23 losses, and 3 draws.



World featherweight champion Alberto “Baby” Arizmendi (center) doles out advice to young amateur boxers Carlos Chavez (left) and his older brother Alfredo Chavez (right) in 1934. Both Chavez brothers, who later turned professional, pose with Arizmendi at the original Main St. Gym, which was located at 321 South Main Street in Los Angeles, before it burned down in 1951. Arizmendi, possibly at age 14 the youngest boxer to turn professional, went on to become Mexico’s first boxing star. Newspapers described Arizmendi as “displaying all the speed and agility of his Aztec ancestry” who “the brown idol of Old Mexico and Little Mexico alike” decisively took a 10-round decision defeating Newsboy Brown of Los Angeles for the world featherweight title (as recognized by the California Athletic Commission) at the Olympic Auditorium on October 18, 1932. Born in Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico, Los Angeles fan-favorite Arizmendi also captured the NYSAC world featherweight title in 1932 and the California-Mexico world featherweight title in 1935. Arizmendi fought from 1927 to 1942 and closed out his career with 84 wins (19 knockouts), 26 losses, and 14 draws.

THE 1940s

BOMBS AWAY ON THE WEST COAST

Enrique Bolanos was far and away the most popular fighter Los Angeles ever knew. No one has ever come close. He had a 'look' like no other. You would have had to see it to know what I mean. It was the 'look' his fans saw and loved. There will never be another like him.

—Johnny Ortiz, boxing journalist, as told to David A. Avila of the Sweet Science website

This was the beginning of *the golden age* of Los Angeles boxing. The 1940s were the prime time of bantamweight champion Manuel Ortiz, who impressively dominated his division. They were also the glory days of beloved lightweight contender Enrique Bolanos. The West Coast swing era officially kicked in. With Pachuco swagger, zoot suits and khakis pressed tight, they spent their money as fast as they made it.

From Corona, California, came Manuel Ortiz, who was the two-time bantamweight titleholder for eight years (1942–1950), except for a brief two-month span in 1947. At the time, only heavyweight champion Joe Louis had more title defenses than Ortiz, who had a total of 21 during his reign. Ortiz's spectacular run as monarch of the bantam division included jumping up in weight class to fight such featherweights as Willie Pep and Enrique Bolanos. Ortiz said Los Angeles featherweight Carlos Chavez was his toughest opponent in his career. Local boxing writers raved, "Ortiz and Chavez fought like wildcats and the referee never had to break them."

Bolanos was a huge Mexican American favorite here after World War II. Matchmaker Hap Navarrro wrote of the charismatic Bolanos, "There were few moments in my active boxing life that compared with the thrill of watching this brilliant boxer, one of the best to grace a California ring, unfurl his heart and soul before an adoring audience." Bolanos recalled to the *Los Angeles Times*, "If I were born again, I would still be a boxer . . . I trained hard for the fights, but I had a lot of fun, too. I was young and crazy. I went to dives, thinking George wouldn't be able to find me, but he always did." Manager George Parnassus saw Bolanos as a son, "but look at my white hair, he put 90 percent of them there."



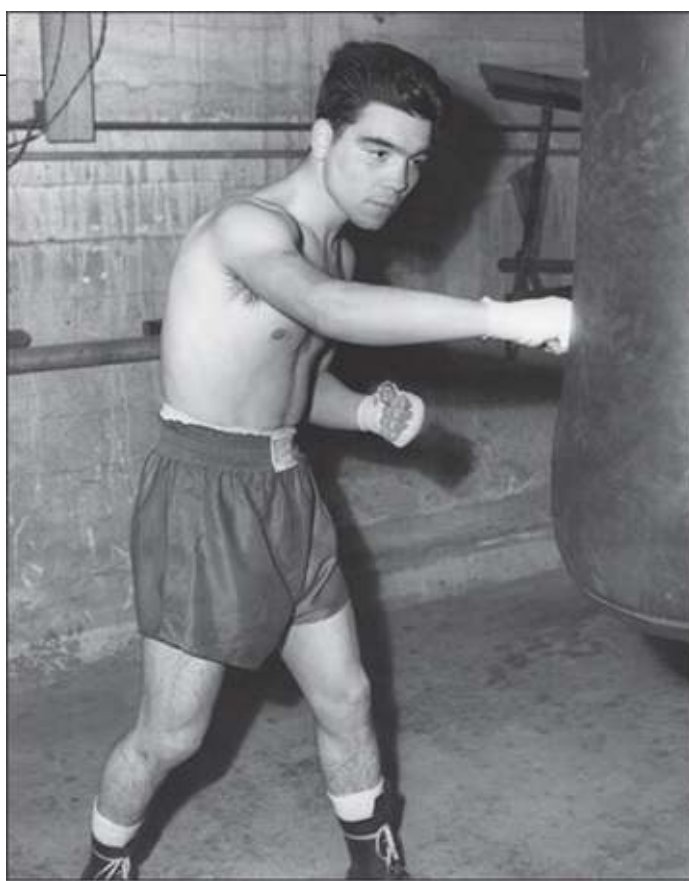
Manuel Ortiz, two-time world bantamweight champion, battled in the ring from 1938 to 1955 and while in his prime, held the indoor gate records for Los Angeles and Mexico City. Considered one of the best boxers of the 1940s, Ortiz first won the bantamweight title on August 7, 1942, when he outpointed defending champion Lou Salica of Brooklyn, New York, at Hollywood Legion Stadium in a 12-round unanimous decision. Ortiz had an incredible record of 21 wins with only 2 losses in title fights and will go down as one of the most active world champions in the history of boxing. Bantamweight kingpin Ortiz was a fighting machine who ended with a record of 101 victories (55 knockouts), 28 losses, and 3 draws. Below, Ortiz relaxes while reading the newspaper during World War II.



Talented lightweight contender Enrique Bolanos was the top draw for fans of the Los Angeles boxing scene from 1941 to 1952. Bolanos, of Durango, Mexico, fought regularly at the Olympic Auditorium and Hollywood Legion Stadium, chalking up 79 wins (44 knockouts), 22 losses, and 5 draws during his illustrious career. Even though Bolanos won the California state lightweight championship in 1947, the world championship title eluded him in his three attempts to win the belt from arch-nemesis Ike Williams.



The career highlight for Carlos Chavez, “The Iron Man,” was a 12-round unanimous decision win over Manuel Ortiz for the California featherweight championship on October 22, 1946, at the Olympia Auditorium. Chavez, no relation to boxer Fabela Chavez, was from the Palo Verde neighborhood of Chavez Ravine (a place known as the “Poor Man’s Shangri-La”). Chavez retired with a record of 66 victories (20 knockouts), 37 losses, and 10 draws while fighting from 1939 to 1956.



“Fabulous” Fabela Chavez was a relentless punching featherweight boxer from the Bunker Hill district next to downtown Los Angeles. Chavez won the California featherweight championship by a 12-round split decision victory over Lauro Salas at Hollywood Legion Stadium on July 27, 1951. Chavez, a Roosevelt High alumnus, was managed by George Parnassus and trained by Johnny Villaflor while fighting from 1945 to 1955. Chavez ended with a record of 47 wins (15 knockouts), 24 losses, and 1 draw.



The two top Mexican American boxing idols of the decade met once in the ring. In a featherweight dustup, Manuel Ortiz dealt a TKO loss to Enrique Bolanos at the Olympic Auditorium on August 2, 1944. Bolanos's corner threw in the towel after he was knocked down for the second time in the sixth heat. Looking like a doo-wop singing group, from left to right, are Joe Herrera (actor/ promoter), Bolanos, Ortiz, and unidentified. (Courtesy of Bob Recendez.)

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