Spanish-Speaking People). The congress was a coalition of middle- and working-class associations in Los Angeles, dedicated to protecting civil liberties and bettering the lives of Hispanic Californians. Among its supporters were such Hollywood luminaries as Anthony Quinn and Delores del Río. Elected the first president of the congress was Mexican-born activist Josefina Fierro de Bright. Under her leadership, the congress fought discrimination and worked for better housing and health care for Mexican Americans.

World War II brought limited progress. Paradoxically, some of this resulted from uneasy afterthoughts about two glaring wartime episodes of Anglo-American bigotry—the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and the zoot-suit riots.

On August 2, 1942, in East Los Angeles, the body of a Mexican American boy with a fractured skull was found beside a germ-infested old reservoir used as a swimming hole, which the newspapers dubbed the “Sleepy Lagoon.” There had been some scuffling the night before between two juvenile gangs, but there was no direct evidence of murder, and no witness. Nevertheless, 300 young Latinos were arrested, 23 indicted, and 17 convicted. The defendants were brutally treated while in jail, and racial prejudice was apparent throughout the proceedings. In a pseudo-scientific report to the grand jury, a police lieutenant explained violent crime by Mexicans as a racial characteristic, and the chief of police and the sheriff endorsed
the report. The bias in the trial was so blatant and so clearly symptomatic of a larger social injustice that it ultimately led to some improvement in public attitudes. This came in part from the work of a defense committee headed by Carey McWilliams and in part from the verdict of the appellate court, which threw out all the convictions and strongly rebuked the trial judge.

The Sleepy Lagoon case was significant not only because it revealed the depths of xenophobia and racism, but also because it led to what historian Manuel Gonzales has called “the first effective mobilization of the Mexican community in southern California.” Helping to mobilize that community were activist Josefina Fierro de Bright and La Opinión, the city’s largest and most influential Spanish-language newspaper. The Mexican residents of Los Angeles came to perceive that their entire community was on trial, not just those arrested at Sleepy Lagoon.

During this period, some young Latinos were wearing the zoot suit, originally as the proper costume for jitterbug dancing but later to attract attention, to show their emancipation from their elders, and to express their group solidarity. Much of the public believed that not only all zoot-suiters but virtually all young Latinos were pachucos, or juvenile hoodlums. On June 3, 1943, mobs of white sailors, soldiers, and civilians in downtown Los Angeles began to beat up zoot-suiters and tear off their clothes; these race riots continued for 6 days until the Navy declared Los Angeles off-limits. Historian Mauricio Mazón, author of Zoot-Suit Riots (1984), has interpreted the violence as an act of “symbolic annihilation.” Stateside servicemen, far from the actual theaters of war, released their pent-up frustrations by attacking pachucos as ersatz enemies of the nation. Whatever motivated the rioters, their hateful actions left a deep and abiding scar.

The war and postwar periods brought a degree of occupational and geographical mobility that considerably weakened barriers against intermarriage, equality of employment, and housing opportunities. Mexican Americans were not segregated in the armed forces, and many acquired a new experience of integrated living. They volunteered in greater numbers and won more Congressional Medals of Honor, proportionately, than any other ethnic group. After the war, many improved their status by education under the G.I. bill.

By the 1960s, Mexican Americans in California were more heterogeneous and much more urbanized than was commonly supposed. More than 85 percent of them lived in cities; less than 15 percent of those employed were agricultural laborers. During the 1960s many younger Mexican Americans joined a militant new crusade in search of ethnic identity. Reviving the belief of Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos that people of mixed race would inherit the earth, many Mexican Americans began to call themselves La Raza—“the race” or “the people.” Another appellation, also embraced with defiant pride, was Chicano, a shortened form of “Mexicano” with the first syllable dropped and the “x” pronounced as “ch” in the fashion of Mexico’s Chihuahua Indians. As journalist Rubén Salazar observed, “A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself.” Young Mexican Americans came to perceive more clearly the challenges they faced and to protest more vigorously the forces of discrimination. “My involvement with the Chicano movement,” explained activist Delia Alvarez in 1970, “has done more than anything to open my eyes to things as they really are.”