More on Harlingen's Tortilla Machine Masters

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There is always room for innovation and improvement; this leads to competition and the public is the beneficiary. The Rio Living article (3/2) about the inventive Jesus L. Contreras, Sr. is a case in point. Undoubtedly his work help lead to the popularization and increase consumption of tortillas in this country. This is especially so for flour tortillas, which in the U.S. widely outsell corn ones.

I vividly remember seeing my first tortilla-making machine about ten years ago in a supermarket in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Located for public viewing, the emerging tortillas were ballooned before their puffiness collapsed shortly after they emerged along the narrow conveyor belt. The pleasant odor of the hot cooking oil permeated the store. The freshness of the tortillas was a strong enticement to buyers watching the neat automated creation and procession of the staple.

The remarkable thing is that Mr. Contreras was one of two Harlingen entrepreneurs involved with tortilla-making machines. The other individual here was Santos G. Garcia. Here is his story.

Santos G. Garcia is born in 1902 near what will later become Rio Hondo. It is his grandfather who sells Lon. C. Hill the 2000 acre Los Costanos Ranch for 50 cents an acre. Garcia will attend the first Harlingen school for Mexican ethnics. He is later to help subdivide the Mexican housing sections of Harlingen, Brownsville, and Mercedes before going bankrupt in 1934. He then became a claims adjuster for the Lloyd Caldwell Corp., where Harvey Oler was manager. In this same year he begins selling tortilla-making machines. These were invented in Mexico in 1911. Renting a vacant lot at 515 W. Monroe from Carl Woods for $3 a month, Garcia sets up a corn grinder and tortilla machine under a shelter. He soon improves his machine after seeing a more advanced model in Brownsville. By 1941 he is to open four more tortilla factories in Harlingen. A dozen sells for 10 cents. Over time, and if he is to be taken at his word, he is to sell 4,000 tortilla-making machines across the southwest. In 1946 he will establish Club Educativo Commedo de Caming. This organization loans money to Latin students attending college. The club has 400 members who contribute 50 cents a month for the education fund.

What became of Mr. Garcia I do not know. Of six Santos Garcias born in 1902 and listed in the social security death index for Texas, the one that may come closest to our man was born 1 November 1902 and died July 1973. This individual worked throughout Cameron County and especially the Harlingen area. However, a scan of VMS microfilm for this month reveals no obituary for him. Perhaps a reader can tell us more of him.

As a footnote I add that it was in 1945 that the Ramirez Tortilla Factory at 426 South F was operating and may have been one of the first large-scale producers of its type. It also marketed tostados, tacos shells and chalupas Valley-wide.