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Roman Mejias, Houston's First Major League Latino Star: The Troubled Legacy of Race Relations in the Lone Star State

Before the 1999 baseball season, Houston Astros owner Drayton McLane outraged many Hispanics in Texas by remarks that were constituted as racist or at best racially insensitive. After profuse apologies, insisting that his comments were taken out of context and misunderstood, McLane met with leaders of the Hispanic community to smooth things over. McLane's comments and the ensuing controversy indicated a lack of marketing and business sense, for why would a middle market team such as the Astros wish to offend the growing Hispanic community in Texas, as well as the international sensibilities of neighboring Mexico?

However, Houston major league baseball management has a history of failing to tap the Latino community, which falls into the troubled history of Anglo-Latino relations in Texas. When major league baseball arrived in Houston with the 1962 Houston Colt .45's, the team placed in Colt Stadium was predominantly white with one African-American player, Jim Pendelton, and one Latino, Roman Mejias, both of whom were drafted out of the Pittsburgh Pirates organization.

While the Houston franchise struggled to finish in ninth place, ahead of their expansionist rival New York Mets, the Cuban-born Mejias emerged as a National League star; slugging 25 homeruns, driving in 76 runs, and batting a solid .286. One might expect that Houston management would market a rising Latino star such as Mejias for the Mexican-American community in Texas. Instead, the Colt .45's traded their most valuable player for Boston infielder Pete Runnels, who had led the American League in batting. The trade proved to be a disaster for both clubs, as with a change of scenery the batting production of Mejias and Runnels drastically declined.

Since that ill-fated trade following the 1962 season, Houston management has done little to tap the Hispanic market in Texas. Many thought the Astros (which replaced the Colt .45's logo following the 1964 season) had found their Latino star with Dominican Cesar Cedeno. However, after a December, 1973 incident in which a young woman in the Dominican Republic was killed while playing with Cedeno's gun, the young player never reached his early potential, (although Astros management intervened in the Dominican

Republic, protecting their investment) and in 1981 the Astros traded Cedenó to the Cincinnati Reds. The current Astros ballclub has captured three consecutive Central Division crowns, and sports such Latino players as Ricky Gutiérrez, Moisés Alou, Derek Bell, and Joe Lima; yet, the team is better known for its Anglo stars such as Mike Hampton, Craig Biggio, and Jeff Bagwell.

This paper seeks to examine the legacy of major league baseball and the Latino community in Houston through the story of Roman Mejías. Baseball serves as a microcosm through which to examine relations between Latinos and Anglos in Texas during the early 1960s