

13, 2007

Anne Harrington
National Outreach Coordinator, WETA

Ms. Harrington,

I know that you are receiving a number of letters and emails complaining about the upcoming Ken Burns documentary on WWII veterans, especially from Mexican Americans who are concerned about the omission of this community's experience in the documentary. I am in sympathy with these letters, as this is the kind of omission only an Anglo filmmaker could make. I am a native of New Mexico, where there is a Bataan Museum, many veteranos (including my grandfather from WWI and my father from the Korean conflict), and monuments to the Navajo Codetalkers. Both my parents were veterans, and are buried in the Santa Fe National Cemetery.

But the real problem is both the PBS response and non-response. The Burns team has said that they are not making a film about specific groups, but then have responded in a circular way that they are singling out some groups "due to their history." But the train is rolling, and will soon leave the station. This larger response from Latinos is not ethnic or racial, although I think that the official response of PBS hunkering down is such. We are used to this kind of historic myopia, including that of PBS and other film makers, who have simply airbrushed us out of existence, even those of us whose families predate Anglo arrival. My ancestor Juan Bautista de Olivas came from Zacatecas, Mexico, to what is not New Mexico in 1695. How did Mexicans get so marginalized.

As you formulate a response, I urge you to take this seriously. Latinos are a growing part of the population, and if you want to assure that the community invests in PBS and other taxpayer and publicly-supported arts, you and your colleagues simply must do better. If you provided better support to the Paul Espinosas of the world to make more documentaries, that would be one thing. But the bulk of your programming should also feature this community, or you will miss a substantial and substantive series of events.

Thus, this protest is about the entire process, the crabbed view of the world, and the tendency of majority groups to consider us only when we do it ourselves, not as a part of the entire US experience. I am enclosing a piece I wrote (forthcoming in a book on WWII veteranos) about an historic incident where a US veteran, Mexican American was disrespected in Texas after he returned from D-Day, even after his winning the Congressional Medal of Honor. In a way, his treatment is no different than that being accorded in the Burns project.

Sincerely,

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