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Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

***“Educate a woman
and
you educate a family.”***

Jovita Idar



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Jovita Idar: Mother of Mexican-American Civil Rights

Educator, journalist, and feminist, [Jovita Idar](#) became the voice for Mexican-American civil rights in the early 20th century, especially for children and women. She also championed bilingual education as a means of preserving Mexican heritage and culture.

Born in Laredo, Texas in 1885, Idar was the second of eight children. Her father was the editor and eventual owner of the progressive Spanish-language newspaper, [La Crónica](#), so Idar was exposed to political activism from an early age. The paper covered Mexican affairs in Texas and was a unifying force within the community.

After attending Methodist schools, Idar earned her teaching certificate in 1903, then took a job at a school for Mexican-American children in a small town. She quickly became frustrated by the school's lack of basic supplies and books and she worried over her

students who lived in extreme poverty and suffered from preventable illnesses. The stark inequities between White and non-White communities left a deep impression on Idar and it changed the course of her life. Believing she could have a greater impact as a journalist, Idar left teaching to join her father and two brothers at the paper.



Idar, second from right. UTSA Libraries Special Collections

At *La Crónica*, Idar covered racism against her community. Jim Crow laws (or Juan Crow, as some scholars refer to them) were in effect throughout the Southwest targeting Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans as well as African Americans. It was common to see signs posted in public places that read: “No Negroes, Mexicans, or dogs allowed.” Extreme violence against minorities included lynching, and Idar made it her mission to report on these horrific crimes. Perhaps as a counterpoint, she began to write poetry under the pen name, A.V. which stood for “Ave Negra” or “Black Bird.”

When the Mexican revolution began (1910-1920), Idar and her family became strong supporters of the insurgents fighting to overthrow Mexico’s ruling class and dictatorship. Aligned with the revolution’s ideals of economic, social, and political equality, Idar’s family [organized](#) the [First Mexican Congress](#) in 1911 to focus on similar issues confronting Mexican-Americans. The Congress drew large crowds of men and women and featured women speakers advocating women’s suffrage.

To support this emerging feminist agenda, Idar formed [La Liga Femenil Mexicaista](#), The League of Mexican Women, a political and charitable organization. Its efforts were directed towards educating Spanish-speaking children about their heritage and helping women achieve economic, social, and political parity. Idar was elected as the group’s first president. Soon after, she launched [El Estudiante](#), a bilingual newspaper for educators.

In 1913, while fighting continued in Mexico, Idar crossed the border to volunteer as a nurse with [La Cruz Blanca](#), the Mexican equivalent of the Red Cross. She treated civilians and soldiers from both political factions.



Idar, right. UTSA Libraries Special Collections

"Later that year, she returned to Texas and" began writing for the newspaper, [El Progreso](#). In one article she criticized President Woodrow Wilson for sending U.S. troops to the border. Idar's article angered both the Army and the Texas Rangers. One day, under orders from the Texas Governor, they descended on the newspaper's offices intending to shut it down. Instead, they encountered Idar standing in the doorway, refusing to give them access. Eventually, they left only to return later and destroy the paper's printing presses, which forced the paper to close.

When Idar's father [died](#) in 1914, she became editor of *La Crónica*. Two years later, she launched her own newspaper, [Evolución](#).



Idar [married](#) in 1917 and moved to San Antonio. In San Antonio, she started free kindergartens for Spanish-speaking children, organized political meetings, worked as a translator, and also wrote for a Methodist Spanish language newspaper, *El Herald Cristiano*. Idar never had children of her own, but helped to raise her sister's children after her sister died in childbirth.

Idar died in 1946 at the age of 60.

In recent years, Idar has begun to receive the recognition she deserves. Google honored her in 2020 with a "[Google Doodle](#)," and *The New York Times* [published](#) a latent obituary in its *Overlooked* series. In 2023, the U.S. Mint issued a coin with Idar's image as part of its [American Women Quarters™ Program](#). Increasingly, Idar is the subject of scholarly articles, biographies, and documentaries.

Ask a Friend: Idar argued that children of Mexican heritage need to learn the language of their ancestors to fully appreciate their cultural history. Yet, today, bilingual education in public schools remains a topic of debate. What do you think?

Ask Yourself: What practices can I incorporate into my life to combat racism?

Women Make History Swag Available!

During Women's History Month, \$1 from each [purchase](#) will be donated to support women's health research. Help spread the love. If you [purchase](#) a mug or book bag, post a photo of yourself with the item on Instagram and or Facebook, and tag me (@SharonSpaulding) in your post. Or follow me and share my posts!

Speaking of Women's History Month, here's a fun [playlist](#) to sing and dance along to!





[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

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