Holding old records brings reverence for those who struggled

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I always tremble with awe and respect at the sight of, and while handling, historical documents, this despite having often spent thousands of hours in archives poring over such records.

Examining these primary source materials makes me feel I am intruding someone's past sacred space — which is why I am not a collector, either of old books or papers.

I am, therefore, at the moment the uneasy guardian of a set of some roster and minutes books of an early 20th century mutualista (self-help) society from a small community neighboring San Antonio.

These voluntary organizations have always fascinated me and my fellow historians because they provide clear evidence of the Mexican-American community's resolve to survive in a new world otherwise beset by a constant array of forces attempting to exploit and dominate it.

Here were workers paid dirt-poor wages saving 25 to 50 cents a week — the equivalent of the cost of two meals for an entire family — in order to buy insurance in the fraternal society.

These self-help groups became the vehicles for political action and the formation of social clubs. That transformation is vividly described and dramatically analyzed in "The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas," by Emilio Zamora, published by Texas A&M University Press.

Playing a key role in bringing several of these South Texas organizations together was Laredo resident Sara Estela Ramirez.

The graduate of the Ateneo Fuente, a Saltillo, Coahuila, "normal school," or teachers' college, Ramirez had been recruited to teach in a Laredo escuelita, or private school.

Shortly after arriving in her new community in 1898, she began contributing essays and poems to La Cronica and El Comercio, two Laredo Spanish-language newspapers.

Interestingly, Ramirez became one of the handful of writers and speakers who articulated the goals of the Mexican worker mutualistas so well that they joined and organized in part, defying the odds and practices that kept poor laborers and Mexican-Americans separated from power.

This Mexican movement spilled across the Rio Grande, transformed in many ways, including the formation of La Sociedad de Obreros, Igualdad y Progreso, the Equality

and Progress (International) Labor Union. Ramirez was one of the principal speakers at this organization's 24th anniversary celebration.

On that occasion, Ramirez urged workers to tap their humanity to create "something grand, something divine, that will make us sociable, that will ennoble us…" while vigorously condemning their exploitation by avaricious corporations and the egotistical government leaders.

The new order Ramirez advocated was the true natural order. A society that alienated and divided its citizens could only be mended by a renewed spirituality that promoted respect, reciprocity and brotherhood.

Workers should be confident, she pointed out, that "their arms maintain the wealth and growth of industry (and society)."

While providing this intellectual and spiritual base for unionization, Ramirez, with Juana B. Gutierrez de Mendoza and Elisa Acuña y Rosete, shuttled between Laredo and San Antonio and between the United States and Mexico establishing newspapers, addressing labor union rallies and collecting funds to support strikers.

With the terminal and repair shops for the Mexican railway system, Laredo had become the hotbed of Federal Labor Union organizing activities.

These were supported by more than eight local Spanish-language newspapers, demonstrating the intense political involvement of the Mexican-American community.

The papers circulated in Mexico and across South Texas, including in San Antonio.

Here, however, labor union activists faced a hostile anti-Mexican environment that excluded Mexican-Americans from semiskilled and skilled blue-collar positions.

Greatly frustrated in her efforts to unite workers in San Antonio, Ramirez continued her organizational activities in Laredo and elsewhere in South Texas and Mexico, recruiting members and seeking political and financial support.

Her greatest contribution, however, remained the ethical and spiritual guidance offered to union members and the Mexican-American community at large.

In following her work, as in handling and reading the mutualista organizational records temporarily in my possession, I sense I am stepping on ground made sacred by the toil and sweat of dedication and commitment to the community