

10-2000

## The Early Development of the Hispanic Community in Fort Worth and Tarrant County, Texas, 1849-1949

Kenneth N. Hopkins

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Hopkins, Kenneth N. (2000) "The Early Development of the Hispanic Community in Fort Worth and Tarrant County, Texas, 1849-1949," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 38: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol38/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu](mailto:cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu).

## THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY IN FORT WORTH AND TARRANT COUNTY, TEXAS, 1849-1949

by *Kenneth N. Hopkins*

The Hispanic community is the fastest growing portion of the North Texas population. Urban areas such as Fort Worth attract thousands of new immigrants every year and provide a safe haven where native Hispanics can prosper. This population trend is recent. In the early decades of Fort Worth's history, there was almost no Hispanic population. Not until after 1900 did sizeable numbers of immigrants from Mexico arrive, and they were not particularly welcomed by the previous residents. Officials tended to ignore the newcomers except when they perceived the Mexicans' presence as a problem. Even today, we tend to ignore the contributions of this portion of our community. With the exceptions of J'Nell Pate's *North of the River* (1994) and Robert Talbert's *Cowtown-Metropolis* (1956), historical studies of Fort Worth fail to mention non-white ethnic groups. Only recently have a few students, scholars, and institutions commenced the painstaking effort of uncovering primary source materials. The purpose of this essay is to provide a general outline of the advent and early development of the area's Hispanic population and to suggest possible topics of investigation.<sup>1</sup>

Although Texas was a Spanish and later a Mexican province, the upper regions of the Trinity River were far above the line of colonization. They remained the lands of the Indians until after the Texas Revolution and the annexation of the state into the Union. In 1849, Major Ripley Arnold of the United States Army established a military outpost at the junction of the West and Clear Forks of the Trinity River. Fort Worth quickly fulfilled its purpose of making the frontier safe for white settlement. By 1850, there were 664 white settlers in the newly established Tarrant County. Three years later, when the Army abandoned the site to build a fort farther west, merchants took over the empty buildings and founded the town.<sup>2</sup>

There were apparently no Hispanics among the earliest settlers. Although Mexican drovers may have passed through Fort Worth driving cattle from South Texas along the Chisholm Trail during the subsequent decades, the community was slow to attract Spanish-speaking residents. The federal census of 1870 and early city directories, which date to 1877, listed no Spanish surnames.<sup>3</sup>

Even by 1880, there were only twelve individuals enumerated in the federal census of Tarrant County (out of a total population of 6,663) who were Mexican-born or had a Mexican-born parent. Of these twelve, nine unmarried males and one unmarried female lived in the City of Fort Worth. The men ranged in age from twenty-three to fifty-five years. All were common laborers or kitchen workers. Six lived in the household of Abby Grez, a thirty-three-year-old, Mexican-born laborer who was married to an Anglo woman. Two others were prisoners in the city calaboose. A young dishwasher lived and worked at the Mansion Hotel on Fourth and Main streets. The single female, Lu ConChita, was an eighteen-year-old Cuban who boarded with a dressmaker. The only Hispanic couple in Tarrant County was Oreo Martice, a thirty-year-old Mexican farm laborer living near Johnson Station (Arlington)

---

*Kenneth N. Hopkins is currently the City Archivist and Manager of the Genealogy/Local History Unit of Fort Worth Public Library, Fort Worth, Texas.*

with his twenty-four year old wife, Julio, who was a native Texan but had Mexican-born parents.<sup>4</sup>

During the next decades the newly built railroads made Fort Worth a distribution center for temporary manpower. A steadily growing population of Hispanic workers migrated from Mexico and South Texas as far north as the Canadian border and back seasonally as farm laborers. Some of the workers gradually made their homes in Fort Worth. According to the census statistics in 1890, forty-seven residents of Tarrant County were Mexican-born, one was South American, and two were Cuban or West Indian. Unfortunately, because the census schedule itself has not survived, nothing more about these individuals can be known.<sup>5</sup>

The small Hispanic population was in flux at the turn of the century. It was clearly established, ranging from around fifty to 100 adult residents, according to the city directories of this decade. They were scattered in rooms and rent houses of the working class neighborhoods on the southern and eastern edges of downtown Fort Worth, primarily on South Main, Rusk (now called Commerce), and Calhoun streets. The wage earners had settled into the lower level of the urban economy as day laborers, as small-scale craftsmen such as barbers, tailors, and shoemakers, or as food vendors. Specific members of the population changed from year to year. A comparison of the listings of the issues of the city directory for 1896, 1898, and 1900 shows only six of the same individuals: Carmelo Barbazza, a lime burner; Juan Cruz, a tamale peddler; Riley Gonzales, a railroad worker; George Martinez, a chili peddler; Isidoro Martinez, a tamale peddler; and Peter Rodriguez, a tamale peddler. The size of the Mexican-born population, however, increased gradually.<sup>6</sup>

The census of 1900 provided additional insights on the nature of the Hispanic population. The schedules listed ninety-four individuals either Mexican born or of Mexican descent—seventy-four in the City of Fort Worth and twenty in the surrounding countryside. Of these, a quarter were unmarried or widowed adult males. They ranged from twenty to ninety years of age with most in their late middle years. These men mostly had immigrated from Mexico within the previous two decades and remained unnaturalized residents. Nine of the group described their occupations variously as chili vendor, tamale peddler, or cook. The rest were day laborers. A few of them rented houses, but most lodged with Mexican families.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Rodriguez was a member of this group. At the age of seventy, he worked as a cook and a tamale peddler and rented a small house on Jones Street, located at the eastern edge of downtown near the rail yards. *Senor* Rodriguez, however, was not typical because he was a naturalized citizen who had immigrated from Mexico in 1850. His name appeared in the Fort Worth city directories for years prior to the 1900.<sup>8</sup>

More typical was Barrillo Buenillo, a fifty-nine year old widower. He had immigrated from Mexico in 1896 and recently filed his citizenship papers. He rented a house on Jones Street and operated a chili stand there. He acquired extra funds by subletting a room to Victoriano Robledo, a fifty-year-old bachelor who had immigrated in 1898. Robledo peddled tamales.<sup>9</sup>

The one unmarried Hispanic adult female to appear in the census in 1900 was Juanita Salbedo. *Senorita* Salbedo had come to the United States in 1895 at the age of eleven. She listed her occupation as bookkeeper. She boarded in

the household of Alfred Clifford, a hotel keeper, with four other young women aged seventeen to twenty years.<sup>10</sup>

All but three of these single Hispanics resided within the city limits of Fort Worth. The exceptions were Jot Joblee and his sons, Bill and Joe, who lived in the countryside. They rented a small house and earned their daily wages as laborers on neighboring farms.<sup>11</sup>

Forty-nine other individuals in Fort Worth and twenty-two in the countryside lived as members of twelve family groups. The heads of these households were somewhat better off economically than the single residents. For example, Antonio Marrilo was a fifty-year-old proprietor of a restaurant located on Sixth Street in downtown Fort Worth. He had immigrated in 1884 but only recently had applied for citizenship. His wife of twenty-five years, Tintora, and their four children had joined him in the United States after six years. They all lived above the restaurant and assisted in the cooking, dishwashing, and other activities of the business. Apparently the restaurant had entertainment because eighteen-year-old daughter Annetta was listed in the census as a "danseuse."<sup>12</sup>

Another more successful member of the Hispanic population was Joseph A. Leal. This thirty-six-year-old Mexican of Spanish-born parents arrived in the United States in 1882. He became a naturalized citizen, married an American-born woman of French ancestry, and learned the trade of tailoring. In 1900 his shop on Throckmorton, a street where there were several tailor and dressmaker shops, had prospered to the point that *Senor* Leal had hired his nineteen-year-old Mexican-born nephew, Joseph, as a second tailor.<sup>13</sup>

Other members of this group were perhaps less prosperous, but still better off than their single countrymen. Among the other married Hispanic males were a musician, a teamster, two chili-stand owners, two tamale peddlers who also operated boarding houses for their fellow immigrants, two day laborers who owned their own homes, and a wood chopper and a stockyard laborer who both rented houses. Finally, Maquerite Lawrence, a twenty-four-year-old, Mexican-born woman, had married Wade Lawrence, an English born fireman, and lived comfortably with their three young children.<sup>14</sup>

These married Hispanics tended to be somewhat younger and more recently immigrated from Mexico. The ages of the heads of households range from twenty-six to fifty-one years, while the ages of their wives range from sixteen to forty-three. Both husbands and wives had come to the United States since 1884; a number of them had already become naturalized citizens. The twelve couples had a total of thirty children, most of whom were also Mexican born, and eight Hispanic boarders, who were mainly single men working as day laborers.<sup>15</sup>

The Hispanics in Fort Worth and Tarrant County could hardly be called a "community." They were still too few and scattered geographically. The city dwellers lived among other laboring folk, mostly immigrants from Europe, near the railroad and stockyards. In the countryside, two families lived close to each other, but the third was in a different precinct. Most of the Hispanics remained day workers on the edges of poverty, although a fledgling middle class of shopkeepers was emerging. Whether there were any nascent Mexican-American social or cultural institutions was not indicated by the city directories or the census. Their existence is doubtful because the population

remained largely transitory with the working class individuals who stayed in Fort Worth for months or even a year usually moving on, undoubtedly for greater economic opportunity.

By 1910, the year of the Mexican Revolution, the situation began to change. That year the Fort Worth city directory listed 256 adult Hispanics. Political and economic turmoil in Mexico pushed many workers northward while promises of better steady wages pulled them to the urban areas. Of the 256 adult Hispanics, 168 were listed as day laborers. Others were craftsmen such as an armature winder, a jeweler, a blacksmith, a shoemaker, a candle-maker, two butchers, a stone mason, and five tailors. Still others were barbers, a grocer, a pool hall operator, a labor agent, a hostler, a policeman, a music director, tamale peddlers, and kitchen workers.<sup>16</sup>

These Hispanic residents were concentrated heavily in three areas. One neighborhood consisted of the streets that bordered the great stockyards and meat packing plants currently developing in North Fort Worth. The second was located on the southeastern edge of downtown Fort Worth along the multiple railroad right-of-ways and the railyards. The third area was located several miles south of the city near the Texas Rolling Mills. Hundreds of the Hispanic men worked as day laborers in these businesses. They took up residence nearby in small rental houses provided for the workers. They did not yet dominate any of these neighborhoods, but they had particular blocks almost to themselves.<sup>17</sup>

According to the census schedules for 1910, over 700 individuals of Hispanic descent resided in Tarrant County. Of these, twelve were Spanish-born, 548 were Mexican-born, and 149 were born in the United States but of Mexican descent. They lived in 121 households. Of these households, seventy-four percent were families consisting of a male head and a wife or the head, his wife, and children. An example of this group was Pedro Gonzales, a thirty-two-year-old male who had immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 1909. He worked as a section hand in the railyard, rented a house on Weatherford Road, and supported his family of five. The family members were his wife Mary Lopez, twenty-eight years old, and his children—eight-year-old son Pantalion, seven-year-old daughter Luisa, four-year-old son Jose, and eight-month-old son Ramon. All of the Gonzaleses were listed as Mexican born and unnaturalized.<sup>18</sup>

This family structure was typical of the Hispanic community developing in Fort Worth—head of the household in his thirties, wife in her twenties, and young children. Altogether there were eighty-five couples and 205 children. Some of the families had been in the United States a few years longer than the Gonzales and had children born there. A few also included adult siblings of the head, in-laws, and other relatives. Almost half of the families had boarders who had immigrated to the United States even more recently.<sup>19</sup>

Although family units were prevalent, many single Hispanics lived in Fort Worth as well. There were 286 unmarried males. A few maintained their own household. For example, Polo Gara, a fifty-three-year-old Texan of Mexican parentage, rented a house on North Houston Street and peddled tamales for a living. Many of the males, however, lived in groups. Four miles north of town working on the Fort Worth and Denver Railroad was a crew of twenty-five laborers, all Mexican born and mostly around twenty years of age.

A similar group camped a few miles southeast of Fort Worth on the road to Mansfield. Seventeen Mexican men boarded with Phillip Acosta, a Mexican restaurant proprietor; ten lived in a rooming house on E. Leuda Street; thirteen in a railroad camp east of downtown; thirteen with Benito Trelino, a packing house laborer; and fourteen with Estep Ramirez, also a packing house worker. The other men stayed in smaller groups of three to seven as lodgers with the family units discussed above. Almost all of the young men had arrived in the United States within the year.<sup>20</sup>

This influx of Hispanics into Fort Worth and Tarrant County was not great in comparison to the overall population. By 1910, Fort Worth was a burgeoning city of 73,312 individuals. The number of people had increased by almost 150 percent in the previous decade. During the same time the Hispanic population had grown by over 700 percent.

The rapid growth of the Hispanic population in Tarrant County concerned civic leaders. Issues of language, morality, unemployment, and sanitation, to name a few of the possible problems, seemed to demand immediate public action. The churches were the first to respond to the needs of this community.

During the earliest years, Saint Patrick's Church, located in downtown Fort Worth, provided spiritual guidance to the few Hispanics in the area. The sacramental records listed a scattering of Mexican individuals baptized, married, or buried during the 1880s and 1890s. The Mexicans sat in the far right hand aisle of the church (the rest of the pews being reserved by white parishioners), and took part in the religious services. By 1913 enough population had accumulated to justify a separate facility. The Daughters of Isabelle (later renamed the Catholic Daughters of America), purchased a shack behind the Tarrant County Courthouse on Bluff Street near the Trinity River and a second building farther north on Clinton Avenue to serve as catechism centers. Within a year they had enrolled eighty-seven students. By 1915, a small church and school were erected at 1428 North Commerce Street in North Fort Worth. The church was under the care of Spanish Vincentian Fathers who had been expelled from Mexico by Pancho Villa. The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word operated the school and the two centers.<sup>21</sup>

Around 1910, the Methodist churches of Fort Worth began their effort to assist foreign-born residents living around the stockyards and meat packing houses of North Fort Worth. Miss Lillie G. Fox, a missionary on leave from Mexico, was the first part-time worker. She rented a four-room cottage in the neighborhood and conducted Sunday afternoon services and weekly sewing classes. The people who attended these classes represented all nationalities, but it soon became evident that the Mexican population had the greatest needs.<sup>22</sup>

A full time missionary, Miss Eugenia Smith, continued this benevolent work. With funds supplied by the Woman's Missionary Society and the City Mission Board, she rented a cottage near the stockyards in a primarily Mexican neighborhood. With the assistance of Miss Lucy Boyd, a public school teacher, she opened a Sunday School. In 1913, another lot was purchased at 2131 N. Commerce and the Wesley Community House was erected. It was in a block surrounded by saloons and brothels. Miss Smith immediately began a war on these houses of vice. She also commenced a broad range of programs, including a kindergarten, home economics clubs, night language classes, a lunch program, a free clinic, a library, a temporary shelter, a play ground, and

various relief activities such as dispensing food and clothing.<sup>23</sup>

Wesley House held religious services for adults as well. At first, converts were placed on the roll of the Boulevard Methodist Church. In 1915, Reverend Dennis Macune and twelve congregants formally organized a Mexican Methodist Church. Juan Los Santos was licensed to preach and became the first Hispanic pastor. Four years later, a separate building was erected on an adjoining lot for the church.<sup>24</sup>

The plight of the Mexican immigrants attracted other humanitarians. In 1914, Mateo Molina, a instructor of Spanish at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a student of the Brite College of the Bible at Texas Christian University, both Fort Worth institutions, recognized the need of the immigrants to learn the English language. He opened a mission school on East 21st Street near the stockyards. Soon more than a hundred pupils ranging in age from seven to sixty attended night classes. Several teachers from TCU and the public school system assisted Molina. He also conducted Sunday afternoon religious and devotional services. Another part of his effort was to visit Hispanic families on the north side, whom he found crowded into small, poorly ventilated houses. He demonstrated techniques for better sanitation and distributed food baskets at Christmas with the assistance of the Goodfellows and individual subscriptions.<sup>25</sup>

The efforts of the churches and humanitarians were increasingly important because the growth of the Hispanic community was phenomenal. By 1920 there were 4,471 Mexican-born residents in Tarrant County (not including the native born group who were not separated in census statistics), increasing over 600 percent, while the overall population of the county only doubled to 152,800. Of these, 3,785 resided within the city limits of Fort Worth, which had a population of 106,482.<sup>26</sup>

What made the Hispanic presence even more significant was their continued tendency to congregate into *barrios*. The three Hispanic areas—the southeastern side of downtown Fort Worth, the stockyards north of the city, and the roller mills south of the city—that had developed at the turn of the century continued to attract the newer immigrants. The Fort Worth City Directory for 1920 indicated that some blocks in these areas were solidly Hispanic. In addition, a fourth Mexican community known as “*El Corte Barrio*” developed on the northwestern edge of downtown; its boundaries included the Trinity River bottoms on the north and Lexington on the west, West Bluff on the south, and North Florence streets on the east. Whites often criticized all of these areas, popularly called “Little Mexicos,” as unsightly and unsanitary slums, but for the Mexicans residents they were places of hope. The humble houses, which were superior to the box-car dwellings of the migratory workers, were brightly colored with cactus, shrubs, flowers, and various decorations.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1920s, the rush of migrants from Mexico and South Texas continued in even greater numbers. The city watched this immigration with mounting concern. In Spring 1921 the problem became a crisis. An editorial in the *Fort Worth Record* reported that there were some 3,000 Mexicans migrant workers in Fort Worth and vicinity who were without employment and were being fed by charitable institutions. American labor agents had attracted them by promises of good wages and the opportunity of being free of the economic

chaos that had followed the overthrow of the Mexican national government the previous year. Unfortunately, a business recession in the United States had resulted in the cancellation of their contracts. Many of the unemployed Mexicans were arrested for vagrancy; two had been sentenced to fifteen months in federal prison for stealing food.<sup>28</sup>

It was soon apparent that charitable groups and the police could not solve the problem. Mayor E.R. Cockrell, with the help of the Fort Worth Welfare Association, churches, and local businessmen, organized a "work and eat program." Social workers and police officers spread the message for every able-bodied Mexican male to come to Edwards Park in North Fort Worth. They would be housed temporarily in regulation army tents and fed three meals in return for each day's work clearing brush and performing other odd jobs in the park. If a man refused this offer, he was to be arrested and put to work on the county roads. The program also included food and clothing for the wives and children of the Mexican men who registered; ladies from the Red Cross set up distribution centers and also delivered items directly to the houses of the needy. By the middle of May, some 600 Mexican men had settled in Edwards Park; the park superintendent reported that they worked with vim and much good will.<sup>29</sup>

Mayor Cockrell also contacted Mexican government officials. Consul General Eduardo Ruiz, responding to complaints from many of the mayors of larger Texas cities, led a delegation to tour the state. On April 21, the delegation met with Fort Worth city officials, businessmen, and civic leaders and then held a mass meeting at the butchers' union hall located near the meat packing plants in North Fort Worth. The flags of Mexico and the United States decorated the hall, and the Mexican participants greeted the officials with the two nation's anthems and cheers of "*Viva Mexico*" and "*Viva los Americanos*." Consul Ruiz told the group that the employed should stay where they were because economic conditions in Mexico were poor, but those Mexicans who were jobless and destitute would be repatriated. A local commission headed by Trinidad Mancilla, a Fort Worth tailor, was to register the Mexicans and arrange for their transportation back to the Mexican border.<sup>30</sup>

The repatriation commission set up offices at the Fort Worth Welfare Association and visited Mexicans on the North and East sides. During the next six weeks, four trains carrying approximately 3,000 Mexican men, women, and children left Fort Worth for Laredo, where the people gathered into relocation camps along with thousands of others from Dallas, Houston, and other Texas cities, and later were transported across the border. The Mexican government paid the cost of transportation and also wired \$5,000 to Mayor Cockrell as reimbursement for the relief measures that the city had undertaken. On June 1, the *Fort Worth Record* declared that the "starving Mexican problem is a thing of the past." Two weeks later, the repatriation and relief committee closed its offices.<sup>31</sup>

While the immediate crisis was over the problem continued on a smaller scale. In 1923, the Fort Worth's chief of police requested federal action because of the flood of undocumented workers into the city. United States District Attorney Henry Zweifield and Immigration Inspector H. Smith conducted an investigation. The city police rounded up and held hundreds of Mexicans, but later released them without further action.<sup>32</sup>



The following year, the *Fort Worth Record* announced that hundreds of Mexicans were "invading" the city during the first week of April, as they had annually for years. They reportedly thronged the streets of the Mexican quarter and overflowed into the downtown business district. At least a fourth of them were illegal immigrants who had not paid the \$8.00 head tax required by immigration authorities, but as the newspaper reporter bemoaned, there was "no practical way for wholesale deportation." Local labor agents, such as Eduardo Aldrete of Aldrete Employment Company, planned to ship that week some 300 workers north via the railroad to the Carnegie Steel Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and another 200 to the sugar beet fields of The Great Western Company in Nebraska. Other Mexicans took local jobs chopping cotton or working in the meat packing plants or in the rail yards.<sup>33</sup>

In 1925 the "Little Mexicos" near downtown Fort Worth became the target of a city-wide cleanup campaign. On December 1, Police Captain George Hale led a general raid into the Little Mexico on the eastern edge of downtown, arresting seventy-three idle Negroes and Mexicans. His concern was with numerous "floaters" reported in the area and with two recent murders. The following day Dr. L. H. Martin, the city health director, headed an inspection team composed of police, firemen, and members of the sanitation department. Martin's assessment was that "it was the filthiest place [he] had ever seen;" he complained of tub after tub of dirty, stagnant water, barrels of rotting garbage, broken water closets, and a stall in which a horse and goat were kept that was not large enough. Fifteen eating establishments, mostly located on lower Calhoun Street, were closed and the owners ordered to obtain health permits.<sup>34</sup>

Practically all of the Mexican shacks were fire traps. Dr. Martin ordered the residents to clean up the houses or get out entirely. The firemen assisted by razing some of the worst buildings and removing stacks of lumber that appeared to be hazards. According to the health director, many of the shacks were to be replaced with brick buildings. In the meantime, the clean up would be worth thousands of dollars in valuation to the City. By March, city authorities proclaimed that the condition of the district was a thousand percent improved, the Mexicans having provided the work themselves after the necessity of cleanliness had been pointed out by the inspectors.<sup>35</sup>

Such direct action by city officials was rare, short-lived, and motivated largely by concern with property value. Any real assistance received by the Hispanic community continued to come from local church organizations. In 1922, the ladies auxiliary of the First Christian Church opened a Mexican mission. Three years later, the Mexican Presbyterian Church was established. The Wesley Community Center and the associated Mexican Methodist Church expanded their activities. The Methodists received a boost in 1929 as a new member of the Fort Worth Community Chest. Finally, the San Juan Catholic Church, then under the control of the Claretian fathers, erected a brick facility and continued to operate two Mexican missions during this period.<sup>36</sup>

All of these organizations provided medical aid, emergency relief, classes in English, hygiene, and American customs, and other social services and religious activities. Competition between the denominations was strong. The head of the Catholic Diocese often worried about "the proselyters who work day and night in every Mexican neighborhood of this town." He was

especially concerned about the "planned parenthood, birth control and many other anti-Catholic and unchristian practices" that the Protestant groups encouraged among the Mexicans.<sup>37</sup>

Outstanding among the Protestant leaders was the Reverend Guillermo A. Walls of the First Mexican Presbyterian Church. The son of a Scottish father and Mexican mother, Walls was from Matamoros. He graduated from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth and Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, then held various church posts in several Texas communities. In 1925, the thirty-year-old minister arrived in Fort Worth as a representative of the Tex-Mex Presbytery of the Southern Presbyterian Church. After surveying the community, he selected a site for a church along the Trinity River bottoms west of downtown in "*La Corte Barrio*." The neighborhood was reputed to be the worst in Fort Worth, filled with vacant lots used as dumping grounds, filthy and diseased, a haven for bootleggers, dope peddlers, and criminals.<sup>38</sup>

At first the members celebrated under arbors and in courtyards of private homes, but Walls was able to raise sufficient funds to purchase an old frame building on the corner of West Bluff and Lexington streets, which previously had been a speakeasy. On January 1, 1927, a congregation of twenty-three charter members and their families held the first services of the Mexican Presbyterian Church. Juan Frias and Nicolas Vera were the first elders and Francisco Vega the first deacon. Two weeks later Walls and the officials organized a Society of Christian Effort with three classes—infant, intermediate, and youth—to teach Sunday School. The church slowly developed membership, but it was hindered by the transient employment of many of its members and the reduced number of Mexicans in Fort Worth once the Depression came.<sup>39</sup>

In 1928, the congregation was able to purchase adjoining land and erect a new stone edifice. The building and bell tower were designed by Wall and erected by members of the congregation. The old temple began a kindergarten, a health clinic where Dr. M.E. Gilmore and Dr. J.W. Whitsitt for years dispensed free medical care, and a temporary shelter for migrants. It later housed a Mexican curio shop.<sup>40</sup>

The curio shop was the brainchild of Walls and his wife. Walls was interested in promoting the economic well-being of the Mexican community as well as that of the church. He belonged to the Mexican Chamber of Commerce based in Dallas, and for awhile was the editor of the *Mercurio*, the official publication of the Chamber. He combined that interest with his wife's love of Mexican art, and was soon importing jewelry, pottery, and other articles for sale to the public. The curio shop, which Wall billed as the "largest, most complete [collection] of real Mexican curios in this part of the state," introduced Americans to authentic Mexican heritage; the profits went directly to the mission work among the Mexicans.<sup>41</sup>

By 1930, the influx of new Mexican immigrants into Fort Worth slowed and an increasingly native Hispanic community developed. The federal census reported that there were 4,553 Mexicans in Tarrant County (which by then had a total population of 197,553). Of these people, 3,995 resided in Fort Worth. Less than half of the Hispanic population was foreign born; the majority were natives, although undoubtedly many were first generation Americans.<sup>42</sup>

Because the Census Bureau has not released the census schedules for

1930, specifics about the population cannot be ascertained. The Fort Worth city directory for 1930, however, provides limited details. It listed over 1,300 Hispanic adults living within the city limits of Fort Worth. Of these, 1,094 were males and 237 were females. Many of the names in the directory (471) did not indicate any employment. Of those individuals listed with occupations, 211 were laborers and 103 were simply employees. The packing houses, the rail yards, and steel rolling mills continued to be the largest employers of the Hispanic workers. There were, however, a number of small businessmen and tradesmen: sixteen grocers, eleven barbers, ten pressers, eight tailors, six shoe repairmen, twelve restaurant proprietors, and two tamale peddlers. Most others worked as domestics, waiters, cooks, and other similar service people. A few individuals had achieved more professional status, as engineer, pastor, physician, traffic manager, or veterinary surgeon.<sup>43</sup>

The Great Depression of the 1930s hit the Hispanic community hard. The need for migratory farm work and the kinds of urban labor and services performed by the Hispanics who had settled in Fort Worth was severely diminished. Government statistics indicate that legal immigration from Mexico to the United States plummeted from 40,154 in 1929 to 12,703 in 1930 and to 1,560 by 1935. Some of the immigrants in Fort Worth returned to their native land, but others held on, securing employment when possible and obtaining welfare relief when necessary. The overall appearance of the Little Mexicos, however, changed little: in 1937 a social worker described the area near Wesley House as "streets of small, homes, poor but neatly kept, with flowers blooming in the dooryards and children playing everywhere."<sup>44</sup>

For some Hispanics, the 1930s were a period in which they became permanently established in the community. For example, in 1935 Joe T. Garcia established Joe's Place, a restaurant, in a small frame house located at 2201 North Commerce. Garcia had lived in Fort Worth since 1914. He had worked for years in the meat packing plants and in his uncle's grocery store, where his wife prepared lunches. The grocery had become a popular eating place, so popular that Garcia decided to venture out in the middle of the Depression with his own business. The new restaurant, later renamed Joe T. Garcia's, attracted the important people of Fort Worth and became a local institution. Newspaper publisher Amon G. Carter brought out-of-town guests and mentioned the restaurant in the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*. Garcia proved an important connection to the Mexican community for politics; it was said he could deliver the Mexican vote on the north side.<sup>45</sup>

Other Hispanics were not so fortunate. Besides the financial hardships, there was considerable discrimination and segregation. Hispanics in Fort Worth were never segregated to the same extent as African Americans; there were no Hispanic-only cemeteries similar to Old Trinity and the People's Burial Park. Most Hispanic children went to public schools with non-Hispanic whites. At the schools, however, the children endured considerable pressure from teachers and fellow students to forsake the Spanish language and customs and assimilate into Anglo culture. Even in churches, the idea prevailed that the Mexicans should be taken care of in strictly ethnic congregation until the use of the Spanish language died out.<sup>46</sup>

Clear geographic lines of separation existed as well. Hispanic residents of North Fort Worth were restricted by tradition to the eastern side of North

Main. To cross over into the Anglo side was to risk harassment or worse. Many Anglo merchants refused to serve Hispanic patrons and public parks and other facilities were closed to Hispanics except on certain days. The Hispanic citizens, therefore, generally confined their non-work related activities as much as possible to the *barrios*.<sup>47</sup>

The *barrios* continued to offer the various institutions needed by the community. By the late 1930s, some fifty Hispanic businesses developed, including eleven groceries, ten restaurants, two night clubs, and several garages. There were five recreational clubs, three civic groups, a chamber of commerce, and a federation of Mexican societies to which most of these other organizations belonged.<sup>48</sup>

Religious institutions also thrived in the Hispanic community. By the 1940s there were four Baptist, four Catholic, one Methodist, one Nazarene, one Pentacostal, and one Presbyterian churches serving the Spanish speaking population. According to a Mexican Chamber of Commerce report, seventy-five percent of the community were at least nominal Catholics while twenty-five percent were Protestants. It also reported a gradual increase in the number of Mexicans attending Anglo churches.<sup>49</sup>

The *barrios* offered a variety of recreational activities, including neighborhood sports, films, and parks. Neighborhood youths used vacant lots for baseball and football games. One team, the Aztecs, which was formed by baseball players from all sections of the city, played against teams from other cities of North Texas. By the early 1940s a movie house, the Marine Theatre, showed Mexican films seven days a week. It was patronized more by the older people more than the young. English-speaking theatres were also well patronized by the Hispanic population. The number of Mexicans using the parks and participating in recreational facilities provided by public and private agencies constantly increased.<sup>50</sup>

But the *barrios* could not provide everything that the Hispanics needed. The trend towards integration into the larger community had commenced. The greatest equalizer of the period was World War II. The number of skilled workers, clerks, office girls, men in business, and laborers in unions all increased in a remarkable way. There were still local industries where the Mexican workers had practically no chance of advancement, and the average salary for a Hispanic worker was lower than a white worker doing the same job. Nonetheless, there were definite signs of economic improvement; in 1925 only five Mexicans had telephones, but in 1943 fifty-nine did, and in 1948 that number had risen to 271.<sup>51</sup>

The number of property owners also increased during and after the war. Many Mexican workers purchased lots and built houses. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce encouraged developers to meet this need with houses costing between \$2,500 and \$5,000, especially where they could add a room or two as their conditions improve. It also advocated public housing, but not on a segregated basis. The 300 Hispanic veterans who lived in Fort Worth were an important factor in these sudden changes. After returning, many of them left the "Little Mexicos" and took their families into other parts of the city. This movement into traditionally white neighborhoods caused "a few points of friction, [but] these disappear[ed] when the Anglos realize[d] that nationally, Mexico is our neighbor and locally the Mexicans, if given a chance, can be good neighbors."<sup>52</sup>

By 1949 there were 8,139 persons with Spanish surnames in Fort Worth, or 2.9 percent of the total population. Of this total, 1,509 had been born in Mexico. A study concluded that "while small in number, in terms of the total city population, the Latin-American population is still significant, primarily because a majority tend to live and function together under conditions of at least partial exclusion from the general life of the community. Although spatially, persons of Spanish surname reside in each of the forty-seven tracts in 1950, their greatest concentration was found in twelve tracts around the center of the city and extending north along North Main Street. One other area of concentration was in the southern part of the city east of Hemphill Street."<sup>53</sup>

The first hundred years of Hispanic settlement in Fort Worth and Tarrant County was a period of gradual growth and consolidation. For decades the area failed to attract Hispanic settlers. Only gradually did a few individuals and families, passing through to the cotton fields of East Texas or the northern agriculture fields, decide to stay. Only after 1900 did the Hispanic population, propelled by the economic and political crisis of Mexico and attracted by job opportunities in the meat packing plants, the railyards, and the steel rolling mill, begin to congregate in large numbers. The "Little Mexicos" that arose around these businesses were a haven for the workers and their families that provided familiar institutions and other Spanish-speaking people. They were a matter of concern for the white civic leaders of Fort Worth and Tarrant County, who valued the Mexicans' hard work and enjoyed the pleasures of a "Mexican" meal, but questioned their manner of living and their "foreignness." An uneasy accommodation existed throughout the early decades of the twentieth century which allowed the two groups to coexist. Severe strains were evident during the mid-1920s, when hundreds of jobless immigrants and their families poured into the city. It was the climate of World War II and its immediate aftermath that disrupted the situation completely: the greater economic opportunity and ethnic-racial issues that the war had raised made it impossible to continue the *status quo*.

This brief outline of the early development of the Hispanic community in Fort Worth and Tarrant County opens many questions that historians will someday answer. From what part or parts of Mexico did the immigrants come? Did they bring institutions peculiar to a particular region? Who were their leaders? What was the home life of the average Hispanic in Fort Worth like? How much of their native beliefs and behaviors did they retain and how much was lost because of the pressure of assimilation? What were the effects of segregation? How did the political roles of Hispanics evolve? The answers to these questions and others are part of the rich heritage of Fort Worth and other northern Texas cities, which is undoubtedly different from the long-settled areas such as San Antonio and South Texas. These questions will be answerable only by the painstaking accumulation of evidence, written and oral, just begun by individuals and institutions in the Fort Worth area.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>J'Neil Pate, *North of the River: A Brief History of North Fort Worth* (Fort Worth, 1994); Robert H. Talbert, *Cowtown Metropolis: Case Study of a City's Growth and Structure* (Fort Worth, 1956); "TCU Student Seeks Hispanic Histories," *Fort Worth Star Telegram* (cited hereinafter as *FWST*), April 15, 1994; "Oral History Project Records the Stories of Mexican Immigrants," *FWST*, October 9, 1994.

<sup>1</sup>Arnoldo De Leon, *Mexican Americans in Texas: A Brief History* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1993), pp. 35-36; Oliver Knight, *Fort Worth: Outpost on the Trinity* (Fort Worth, 1990), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>United States Ninth Census (1870), Tarrant County, Texas, Population Schedules; Fort Worth *City Directories*, 1876-79. Hispanics are not a homogenous or easily defined group. When using city directories, the author used a method of counting recognizably Hispanic surnames. This method leads to some underestimation because it does not count those that have Anglicized their names, intermarried with whites, or had surnames easily recognized as Spanish. When using the federal census, the author counted individuals who had been born in Mexico or had one or both parents from Mexico. This method was adequate because most adult Hispanics in Tarrant County during this entire period were either immigrants or first generation Americans.

<sup>3</sup>United States Tenth Census (1880), Tarrant County, Texas, Population Schedules.

<sup>4</sup>De Leon, *Mexican Americans*, p. 53; U. S. Department of Interior, *Report of the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census; 1890* (Washington, D.C.: 1892), 1, p. 660.

<sup>5</sup>Fort Worth *City Directories*, 1896-1900.

<sup>6</sup>United States Twelfth Census (1900), Tarrant County, Texas, Population Schedules.

<sup>7</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671, ED 96, sheet 2.

<sup>8</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671, ED 88, sheet 7.

<sup>9</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671, ED 94, sheet 4.

<sup>10</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671, ED 111, sheet 10.

<sup>11</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671, ED 88, sheet 7.

<sup>12</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671, ED 91, sheet 5.

<sup>13</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671, ED 97, sheet 7.

<sup>14</sup>Twelfth Census, Tarrant County, TX, Roll 1671.

<sup>15</sup>Fort Worth *City Directory*, 1910.

<sup>16</sup>Fort Worth *City Directory*, 1910.

<sup>17</sup>United States Thirteenth Census (1910), Tarrant County, Texas, Population Schedules.

<sup>18</sup>Thirteenth Census.

<sup>19</sup>Thirteenth Census.

<sup>20</sup>*Baptism, Marriage and Funeral Records, 1884-1903*, (Saint Patrick Cathedral Archives, Fort Worth TX; cited hereinafter as SPCA); Father O'Donohu, "Brief History of Catholic Church," 1942 (SPCA); "Daughters of Isabelle Plan to Enlarge Mexican Schools," *Fort Worth Record* (cited hereinafter as *FWR*), August 9, 1914; Guy Thompson, "Short Resume of the History of the Catholic Church in Texas, 1521-1972," (SPCA).

<sup>21</sup>[History of] Wesley Community House, Fort Worth, Texas," Wesley Community House Records, Box 2, Folder 3 (Fort Worth Public Library Archives, Fort Worth, TX; cited hereinafter as FWPL).

<sup>22</sup>Katherine Ashburn, "History of the Fort Worth Wesley House," Wesley Community House Records, Box 2, Folder 5 (FWPL).

<sup>23</sup>"History of Wesley Community Center, Fort Worth," Wesley Community House Records, Box 2, Folder 9 (FWPL).

<sup>24</sup>"North Side Mission School Educates by 'Short Orders,'" *FWST*, January 4, 1915.

<sup>25</sup>U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*. (Washington, D.C., 1922), 3, p. 1024.

<sup>26</sup>Fort Worth *City Directory*, 1920; "A Special Study of the Mexican Group in Fort Worth, Texas," Scrapbook, 1949, Fort Worth Pan American Round Table, (FWPL).

<sup>27</sup>"Mexicans Claim Forced to Steal to Obtain Food," *FWR*, April 1, 1921; "Mexican Labor Invading City," *FWR*, April 2, 1921; "Mexicans and their Masters," *FWR*, April 3, 1921.

<sup>28</sup>Full Report of Mexican Problem Given," *FWR*, April 8, 1921; "Churches Make Appeal to Help Mexicans Here," *FWR*, May 2 1921; "Mexican Problem Near Rapid Solution Here?" *FWR*, May 2, 1921; "City May Hire Idle Mexicans Who are Needy," *FWR*, May 7, 1921; "100

Mexicans Put to Work in Edwards Park," *FWR*, May 10, 1921.

<sup>30</sup>"Mexicans to Probe Local Situation," *FWR*, April 19, 1921; "Consulate for Mexico Needed Here," *FWR*, April 21, 1921.

<sup>31</sup>"Nearly 2000 Mexicans to be Deported," *FWR*, April 22, 1921; "First Load of Mexicans Off Today," *FWR*, May 3, 1921; "Adios USA Buenos Dias Los Mejicos," *FWR*, May 4, 1921; "City is Paid \$5000 Spent on Mexicans," *FWR*, May 18, 1921; "Officer Leaves with Mexicans for Deportation," *FWR*, May 19, 1921; "1200 Mexicans to be Deported Tuesday Night," *FWR*, May 24, 1921; "Distress Relieved Among Mexicans," *FWR*, June 1, 1921.

<sup>32</sup>"Mexicans Freed by Immigration Inspector," *FWST*, March 23, 1923.

<sup>33</sup>"Mexican Labor Invading City," *FWR*, April 2, 1924.

<sup>34</sup>"Close 15 Eating Houses in Little Mexico." *Fort Worth Press* (cited hereinafter as *FWP*), December 2, 1925; Texas Writers Project, Research Data, Fort Worth and Tarrant County, 11938 (FWPL).

<sup>35</sup>Texas Writers Project, 11211.

<sup>36</sup>*FWR*, June 8, 1922; "Helping Build the Hispanic Church in Fort Worth," *North Texas Catholic*, March 11, 1994.

<sup>37</sup>O'Donohoe, "Brief History."

<sup>38</sup>*Ministerial and Lay Directory and Church and Mission Directory, Mexican American, PCUS in Texas, 1887-1977*, (Kingsville, TX, 1977), p. 24; "X Anniversary of the Mexican Presbyterian Center," 1935, Mexican Presbyterian Church Papers, (FWPL).

<sup>39</sup>"La Iglesia de Fort Worth," *El Eco*, August 1941, Mexican Presbyterian Church Papers (FWPL).

<sup>40</sup>*Resumen de la Reunion, Primavera del Presbiterio Mexico-Texano*, April 23-27, 1930, Mexican Presbyterian Church Papers (FWPL).

<sup>41</sup>X Anniversary.

<sup>42</sup>US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population*. (Washington, D.C., 1932), 3, pp. 988, 1015.

<sup>43</sup>Fort Worth *City Directory*, 1930.

<sup>44</sup>John C. Elac, *Employment of Mexican Works in U.S. Agriculture, 1900-1960*. (Los Angeles, 1961), p. 5; Wesley Community House Records, Box 2, Folder 3, (FWPL).

<sup>45</sup>"Family Style," *FWST*, August 29, 1993; Pate, *North of the River*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>46</sup>O'Donohoe, "Brief History."

<sup>47</sup>"Pauline Valenciano's Father Left No Stone Unturned to Give His Family a Better Life," *FWST*, October 10, 1994.

<sup>48</sup>"Special Study."

<sup>49</sup>"Special Study."

<sup>50</sup>"Special Study:" "Theatre a Lost Mecca of Hispanic Culture," *FWST*, February 4, 1998.

<sup>51</sup>"Special Study."

<sup>52</sup>"Special Study."

<sup>53</sup>Talbert, *Cowtown Metropolis*, pp. 84-85.