

REVEALING THE HISTORY OF HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS IN ST. LOUIS

By: Carlos Restrepo - Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of St. Louis



A few years ago, St. Louis County Historian Daniel Gonzales decided to research the history of his mother's side of the family. Gonzales said he could trace back "volumes" of his maternal Jewish heritage and their contribution to society.

"I wanted to find out what our history was here, and there's tons of stuff and places to find information – census records, old synagogues

and cemeteries for example," Gonzales said. "There was a whole volume set on the history that is Jewish heritage and I thought, 'Well that's really cool.'"

He then decided to trace the history of his father's heritage, who identified himself as a Chicano, a term used by some to describe Americans of Mexican ancestry. "As I asked around they said there isn't a history of Hispanics in St. Louis," said Gonzales, as he noticed a gap in early census and historic record-keeping when it came to some immigrant groups. He realized that there not only was a history of Mexican and Hispanic immigration in St. Louis, but that it contributed to the shaping of the region.

"If you dig a little bit deeper and ask a few more questions, you realize there's a story," Gonzales said. "Once you start putting pieces together you realize, this has some pretty significant implications for not only St. Louis but for the Midwest as a region, for the country and internationally. There is a part of the St. Louis story and of Mexicans in the U.S. that was missing."

St. Louis, Gateway to the East?

Although a small number of immigrants had found their way from Mexico to the River City in the late 19th century, it wasn't until around the early 1920s when a major wave of Mexican immigrants arrived in St. Louis escaping the Mexican Revolution. A majority of these immigrants were recruited for labor jobs in large industries in other Midwest and Eastern cities.

"We think of St. Louis as this Gateway to the West and of settlers moving into the western United States and passing through St. Louis," Gonzales explained. "But for Mexican immigrants, coming around the century, this was a Gateway to the East. Employment agencies were bringing them here and then taking them to places like Chicago, Detroit, the Twin Cities – all across the Midwest and beyond where a lot of Mexican enclaves would develop."

There were recruiters in St. Louis too, but not one single industry was actively recruiting Mexican immigrants. Gonzales credits this as one of the reasons why, even today, the Mexican and Hispanic communities of St. Louis are spread out throughout the area. Unlike Italian, French, German and Irish immigrants, there is not a neighborhood where Hispanic and Mexicans settled in large numbers.

"One of the reasons they settled so widely is because there was work in a number of different industries," Gonzales said. "There were concentrations in the north side of St. Louis city, and there were folks in the south side of the city around south Broadway, as far west as Grand, and as far south as Carondelet. Those were places where there were jobs available and affordable housing close by."

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The Spanish Influence

The term “Hispanic” is used in the U.S. to describe those who are native or descendants of a Spanish-speaking nation. Gonzales focused more on those of Mexican heritage, which then and still today represent the largest portion of Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. But other Hispanic groups also settled in the city. Immigrants of Spanish descent settled in areas around south St. Louis.

Perhaps the most prominent figure to come out of the early immigration from Spain to St. Louis was Alfonso J. Cervantes, who served as mayor of St. Louis from 1965 to 1973. Cervantes was born in the city to immigrants from Spain.

“There was an influx of Spanish immigrants and they came at a similar time as the earliest groups of Mexican immigrants,” Gonzales said. “At times, these two groups would overlap. Our Lady of Covadonga in Carondelet was founded by the Spanish community and 30 percent of the congregation was Mexican.”



Rosati Council's Club House, which was the Home of The Spanish Mission

A Strong History of Commerce

In the late 19th century, St. Louis had the largest trading relationship with Mexico of any city in the country. Approximately \$7.5 million worth of trade with Mexico amounted to 43 percent of railroad exports out of St. Louis. A Spanish-language newspaper, El Comercio del Valle, as well as the Mexican-Spanish American Commercial Exchange were fixtures in the city of St. Louis. But as commerce declined and migrant workers came and went through the city, that history faded.

However, since the 1980s, St. Louis has seen a slow but steady influx of new immigrants from Latin America, which Gonzales labels a new wave in the history of the Hispanic and Mexican immigrants in the city.

Cecilia Velazquez, founder, publisher and editor of La Red Latina, a bilingual newspaper in St. Louis, said she has seen the Hispanic community increase and again become a vital part of both the economy and culture of the city.

“A lot. A lot,” Velazquez said, describing the growth of the Hispanic population in the 16 years since the founding of her paper. “Every year I see new faces, and I see how they are contributing to the economy of the area.”

Velazquez, a Mexican immigrant herself, said she hopes this new generation will both learn about the history of their community in St. Louis, and shape the future for the generations to come.

“It’s as if we are a new first generation,” Velazquez said. “We don’t have enough grandmothers in our community yet, but we are getting there. This generation has a big opportunity and responsibility to be the new Latin pioneers.”

Gonzales hopes that those future generations understand there were people like them, many years ago, who came to St. Louis with their hopes and dreams.

“Everybody has a right to have their story told,” Gonzales said. “There is a belief that there aren’t deep roots, that there weren’t Latino people in St. Louis. This really isn’t true. There’s so much evidence as to why this story is important. I think their story is significant and has really many important implications for our community.”