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Early members of the Manhattan Mexican American Community (Mike Garibay by bike, Ignacio Silva, Lupe Silva, Pauline Silva, Carmen Silva, Pete Silva. Front row seated: Ralph Garibay, Aurelio Silva)

About the Author . . .

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A HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS TO MANHATTAN, KANSAS

This paper* is a study of the Mexican ethnic group who immigrated to Manhattan, Kansas and their descendants. The Mexican people who settled in Manhattan came from the Mexican states of Guanajuato and Michoacan with the majority of the families immigrating from the former.

This record of the contributions that the Mexicans and Mexican Americans made to Manhattan is intended to give the reader a broad spectrum of the Mexican influence in Manhattan and the Manhattan Mexican American influence that the descendants of these immigrants have had or now have on the communities to which they have moved.

*A copy of the resource materials used to prepare this paper will be on file at the Riley County Historical Museum.

BACKGROUND HISTORY

The parents of the Silvas and other families who came to Manhattan in the 1890s lived in Mexico during the period of the Juarez Presidency and the French Intervention.

The history of the period began when Maximillian Von Hapsburg accepted the throne of Mexico in 1864 thinking that it had been offered to him by popular vote. He soon discovered that the French actually controlled very little land. Before Maximillian's arrival, the Mexicans, armed with outdated weapons, had defeated the finest French Army.

Following the expulsion of the French, Benito Juarez was elected president. While serving as Juarez's most successful general, Porfirio Diaz had risen to prominence during the war against the French. He later broke with Juarez and ran against him in the elections of 1867 and 1871 and lost both times. Juarez died in 1872 and his vice president, Lerdo de Tejada, finished the term. Diaz ran against Lerdo de Tejada in the next election and lost again. Undaunted, Diaz went to Texas and while there organized a successful plot to overthrow the existing government. His rationale for support was that "no man should be president more than once." Diaz proclaimed himself president in 1876. Shortly thereafter, in 1877, Tejada fled to safety in the United States.

Diaz was master of Mexico until his overthrow in 1911, controlling both the government and the economy with an iron hand. He initiated a plan to modernize Mexico by encouraging foreign countries to build railroads, drill for oil, and construct factories of all types. An effect was to turn the business of the country over to foreigners who were outside the laws of Mexico. Another effect was that "the rich got richer and the Mexican poor got poorer."

Political stabilization and domestic tranquility encouraged foreign investors to take advantage of railroad subsidies. The result of new legislation which brought about the breakup of Indian communal lands made more property available to large land owners, mostly foreign speculators. As a result, many small Mexican land owners were forced into peonage. By the beginning of the twentieth century, European and American businesses had extended so much economic and political control over Mexico that she became known as the stepmother of Mexicans and the mother of foreigners.

The Revolution of 1910 forced the Mexican men already in the United States to return to Mexico to get their families. Despite their original plans to return to Mexico, very few families from Manhattan returned. Attracted by wartime opportunities during World War II, some moved on to Topeka, Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago and Buffalo. The Silvas stayed in Manhattan. Pedro R. Silva and Gumecinco Silva were registered for the draft during this period but were not called.

The depression years brought much economic misery and many social problems to the Mexican families who had immigrated to the United States. A dramatic occurrence during the 1930s was the repatriation of large numbers of non-naturalized Mexicans and American citizens of Mexican descent to Mexico. Mexicans had been sought after to fill the need for workers in the United States prior to the depression years. During the depression, large numbers of Mexicans and Mexican Americans were forced to go on welfare. After 1935, the Work Projects Administration (WPA) provided the bulk of jobs for Mexican Americans. Since local government faced the dual problem of low income from taxes and a rapidly expanding relief program, social agencies began to put pressure on Mexicans to return to Mexico around 1930. Those that left Manhattan and returned to Mexico because of this pressure had been living and working in Manhattan for only a period of ten years. The Pablo Negrete, Pablo Perez, and part of the Ricardo Silva families were some who left for Mexico never to return permanently to Manhattan. Although there are no complete records of the numbers of Mexican and Mexican American families that were repatriated, of those families who stayed in Manhattan, each had family members who returned to Mexico. The families who stayed in Manhattan were those who had grown, married children, who in turn had children who were natural American citizens. Many of the families who returned to Mexico had American born children who were young, or young adults who were forced by culture or tradition to accompany their parents back to Mexico. Of the estimated half million Mexicans who were repatriated, these American born children suffered the greatest injustice in that their civil rights were clearly violated. Because of poorly kept birth records of children born to Mexican families in the United States, many of these children were to struggle for years in order to get their citizenship restored so that they could legally return to their homeland, the United States. On the other hand, many who returned to Mexico were those who suffered the most socially and economically in the United States and desired to return to "Mi Terra" to die. When repatriated, little or no assistance was received from the Mexican government to make the transition to their new life in Mexico.

World War II provided Mexicans and Mexican Americans with new opportunities to improve their social and economic standings. There were more jobs available, and in spite of the fact that they were over represented in the Armed Forces, the services afforded an easy means of naturalization. A reason for this high representation may have been that few of the draft aged Mexican and Mexican American youths either applied or qualified for draft deferments. After the war when these Mexican American soldiers returned home, they had the advantage of the G.I. Bill, job training, home and business loans. These benefits were welcomed, but most failed to find any appreciation from the larger society for the Mexican American contribution to the war effort. Instead, they found that little had changed in the way society viewed them since their departure for the war zone.

PUSH AND PULL TO LEAVE MEXICO

The Mexican people who immigrated to Manhattan in the early 1900s did so primarily to escape a life of extreme proverty in Mexico. The railroads provided them a means of escape from almost continual peonage. President Diaz encouraged the construction of railroads in Mexico by foreign investors. The first railroads were completed in 1887 and extended from Mexico City to El Paso, Texas. The Mexican men who worked at constructing these railroads then crossed into the United States and were recruited by contractors known as "Enganchistas" to work on the construction of U.S. railroads. Some of these agents charged a recruiting fee which was paid by the railroads rather than the laborers.

The first to leave Mexico for these railroad jobs were single men. Next, the married men left their families behind to accept work in the U.S. Prior to finding jobs with the railroads, these men worked as "peons" on large haciendas, in silver mines, as milkmen, tailors, and farmers. Because these jobs paid only pennies a day, the people were perpetually barefoot, hungry, and without hope for the future.

At first, the Silvas worked close to home. Margarito Silva worked at the silver mines in Pachuca, Mexico. Later he worked for the railroad. As the railroad lines were extended, the Silvas and other Mexicans from that area traveled farther from their homes. The combined activities of the mines and railroads took the men of Guanajuato to the border cities of El Paso and Laredo before the revolution. They were recruited by the "Enganchistas" and crossed over the border to work on the U.S. railroads. Many were directly transported long miles from Mexico to Kansas. Arriving in Kansas, these men worked on the railroad and sent money home to their wives and families.

Periodically they would return to Mexico to visit, and in 1910 they began bringing their families to Kansas. The effort to relocate their families increased as the revolution in Mexico intensified. The revolutionaries would rob entire communities and the letters with money to support the Mexican families still in Mexico were being intercepted by the revolutionary forces. Re-uniting the families in the United States became imperative in order to escape the unsafe, chaotic and revolutionary environment of Mexico during that period. To encourage friends and relatives in Mexico to come to the U.S., families already residing in Manhattan inundated them with stories of job opportunities and possibilities to feed, clothe and educate their families.

One of the women interviewed recalls the trip her family made to the United States. The family left Cueramaro by horse drawn wagon en route to the train station located in Abasolo where they waited two days for a train. The trains traveled very slowly and seldom on schedule because of the revolution. When they finally boarded the train to Laredo, she recalls, the train was packed with people and only traveled by night. When they arrived in Laredo, the train depot had just been burned to the ground and the air was laden with the smell of burning human flesh. She states, "The smell was awful and the children were told not to look." At Laredo they boarded a train for McFarland, Kansas and from there took a cargo train to Manhattan. She recalls that they were taught to say, "Ver-R-U-Going?", and to reply, "Man-A-Hat-Tan!"

As the railroads neared completion and the railroad jobs ran out, the Mexicans began looking for other jobs. Many moved directly from working on the railroads to working on the construction of street and trolley car lines. Mr. W.R. West, owner of the Manhattan mass transit system, insisted upon using local labor for construction of the interurban line. He even postponed work on the line until the Mexican laborers he wanted to hire became available. Many worked at a variety of other jobs such as dam construction, food processing at the Perry Packing Company, farm labor and other service occupations. Since the early 1930s the Mexican work force moved toward an active participation in the mainstream of the American economy as the early immigrants established a tradition of hard work for themselves and their families. Their children continued this tradition as they became doctors, lawyers, business owners, teachers, bankers, carpenters and plumbers. These, as well as pipefitters, chemists, nurses and office workers are just some of the occupations that the current generations of Mexican Americans from Manhattan hold today.

Mr. West contacted the Silvas in 1914 and offered each of them the foremanship of their own section of the transit line if they would recruit a work force for the interurban line that was being built in Manhattan. The daughter of Mr. West, Mrs. Vesta West Walker, stated in a taped interview that the Silvas then went to Topeka and surrounding areas where they had Mexican friends and acquaintances and recruited the work crews. The Silvas involved in this venture were Margarito, Pedro R., and Gumecindo Silva.

Until now, the push and pull influences which brought the Mexican families to Manhattan have been discussed. As indicated, those influences that pushed Mexican families to Manhattan were the Mexican economy and the Revolution, and the forces that pulled them were the demand for Mexican labor in the United States as well as the opportunity for better education for their children and generally a better way of life. However, there existed those elements of push to return to Mexico after a period of as much as twenty years of life in the United States. Some found that the fine educations that they received in the United States could not be used to their advantage because of the prejudices held against them. They returned to Mexico to employ their new educational skills in the Mexican job market. Probably the strongest push to return to Mexico occurred during the depression of the 1930s.

There was political pressure placed upon businesses during the depression to hire "American" because of the scarcity of jobs. The prevailing attitude was to take care of the "American" citizen first. This pressure that was placed upon businesses seriously affected the job security of Mexicans working in the United States. Mexicans employed in railroad towns as section hands made up the bulk of the employed Mexicans in the United States at the time. As a

Manhattan Interurban Line (courtesy of Mrs. Vesta Walker)

result, these workers were the first to feel the pressure of this new push to return to Mexico. Fortunately for the Manhattan and other Kansas Mexican railroad workers, the Santa Fe, unlike other railroads, lessened the plight of many by refusing to comply with recommendations made by Kansas Governor C.M. Reed in 1930 to let the Mexican laborers go and hire unemployed U.S. citizens instead. Also, pressure was applied by President Hoover's Employment Commission to rid the state of its non-citizen labor. The Director of the Commission stated:

> I am informed you have a very large number of transient Mexican labor. (In Manhattan this was not true, nor throughout Kansas. The people were alien residents.) This class of labor was brought into Kansas for railroad construction and other work. In some cases they are now a charge upon the city in large numbers. It occurs to me that a request from you as Governor of the state to the railroads responsible for bringing this class of labor into Kansas to return them to Mexico in such a manner that would not render offense to our neighbor to the south, would materially help the unemployment situation. In any event, it occurs to me that citizens of our own country should receive preference to employment against those of a foreign nation.

This information was consequently relayed by the Governor to presidents of the six leading railroads that operated in Kansas. (For the most part, this did not affect the Mexicans who had been in Manhattan since the early 1900s as they had since ceased working for the railroad. However, it did affect a few of the families. These were the families that moved to other cities in Kansas, such as Topeka, or returned to Mexico.) Most of the railroad presidents answered promptly to inform the Governor that they would do all within their power to hire unemployed native Americans rather than Mexican transients. One railroad, the Santa Fe, expressed reservations. The president of this railroad informed the Governor that, "The Mexican laborers who are still with us are permanent residents who, generally speaking, have been in our service for years, and for the most part are U.S. citizens having come from the state of New Mexico." (This statement probably wasn't true.) However, the point is that the Santa Fe went out of its way to retain a laboring element that had become valuable to its operation. It is interesting that three history books have been written in this century about the Santa Fe railroad and all have largely ignored the contributions of this ethnic group in the company's history. It must be admitted, however, that the Mexicans were a very important and valuable group to the railroad industry during the period 1900 to 1940.

Musicians who played at "El Rancho"

HOUSING OF THE EARLY IMMIGRANTS

"When the plucky little steamboat, 'Hartford', pushed away from the wharf at Cincinnati, bound for the 'great desert' of Kansas, it carried on board another installment of Pilgrim Fathers."

The steamboat "Hartford" carried pre-fab houses, some of which were used for an apartment house, and it was the first home for the Mexican immigrants who came to Manhattan in the early 1900s. This Hartford House was referred to by the Mexicans as "El Rancho" and was located at 101 Houston Street.

People living at the Hartford House found that close quarters created social problems such as a lack of privacy. These problems were intensified by the large numbers of single men, "los solteros," in the community. There were jealousies, valid and imaginary, with which some coped successfully while others met with despair.

As late as 1919, the Costello family lived at that address and had also opened a cabinet shop. When the Hartford House was sold, Pedro R. Silva purchased a portion of it and had it moved south of the Rock Island tracks. Most of the Mexicans lived just across the tracks. At this time, the only properties available for purchase by Mexicans were south of Yuma Street or on the outskirts of town. After the flood of 1951, Anglo property owners collected their insurance money and purchased homes in the new parts of Manhattan. Their move made the homes south of Poyntz Avenue and no further west than South Manhattan Avenue available to Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

The Urban Renewal Program purchased the vast majority of the homes south of Yuma Street in 1975. Today there are only two families that reside on South Juliette, south of the tracks. The families that moved are scattered throughout the various neighborhoods in Manhattan. To my knowledge, there was no overt discrimination en-

countered by those buying homes in the newer neighborhoods. The Mexican ethnic section of Manhattan is clustered around the Seven Dolors Church located at South Juliette and Pierre Streets.

DISCRIMINATION

Discriminatory practices affected the wages and benefits of more than 60,000 Mexicans who entered the United States in 1908. Most found employment as section hands on the railroads and were paid a uniform wage of one dollar per day from their first employment in 1902 until 1909. This was the standard wage except for one year when they were paid $1.25 per day. However, it is significant that as a general rule, the Mexican laborer earned less than Anglos similarly employed. Death benefits paid to the survivors of Mexican laborers were from $300 to $10,000 less than those paid to the survivors of American citizens.

In Manhattan, the following incident of discrimination regarding inter-cultural marriage has been recorded: In April, 1910, Judge Morris refused to marry an Anglo girl and a Mexican man. The girl's mother found another judge, Judge Porter, who consented, but after going to the courthouse and conferring with Judge Morris, decided he had something else to do and didn't marry the couple. Judge Morris was the probate judge who issued the marriage license. The couple was finally married by the Rev. A. Holt.

WHAT IS CULTURE? DOES MANHATTAN STILL HAVE A MEXICAN CULTURE, AND IF SO, TO WHAT EXTENT?

A definition of culture is that it is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings of the same ethnicity which is transmitted from one generation to another. Children learn about their culture from what their people explicitly say or do. Much of culture is learned implicitly. For instance, the manner and tone of voice in which one is told to do something or is given information becomes part of the culture learned. Moreover, each family had its values, traditions, and history developed from its own special experiences. That which the past generations learned from their parents is not their whole culture, but their family's way. Each learned a special adaptation of the group culture. For example, the children that were the first born to immigrant parents shared different experiences and memories than perhaps the sixth born. The sex of the person made a difference in what was experienced, and of course, an individual's own temperament and character are not to be ignored when identifying cultural traits.

Perhaps the most essential of the universal ingredients of culture is language. For the most part, the Mexican Americans in Manhattan no longer speak Spanish as the first language. Yet, some children today whose grandparents still speak Spanish in their homes may speak a little Spanish.

As Mexican Americans assimilate into the dominant society, the extended family concept tends to narrow. Uncles, aunts and cousins become less important and less welcome to the nuclear family and the older generations are treated with less deference. Children in the earlier families would seek advice from their parents or the "eldest" before making even minor decisions while their modern day counterparts are far less concerned about gaining parental consent for decisions regarding their personal lives.

The Mexican ethnic community of Manhattan has never been clannish. In the early 1900s the newly arrived immigrants were denied service and segregated in churches and theaters. Although they lived in the same general area and depended upon one another for economic and moral support, their children entered school and established friendships with the Anglo students. It was the men, though, and not the women who were first included in the Anglo society. These men maintained the old custom of leaving the women home unless there was a family gathering, then they, too were included in the festivities.

The Roman Catholic religion is the predominant religion of the Mexican Americans in Manhattan. I saw religious statues and crucifixes in each of the homes I visited indicating there is still a cultural dependence on the Catholic Church and its customs. I do not think that there is regular church attendance by the Mexican American community in Manhattan as a whole. However, Christian beliefs and practices such as prayer in time of need and emotional stress are ever present.

The Mexican immigrants brought with them the "fatherly principle" which was that of conditional love. The love received from the father was mostly dependent upon the degree of obedience and performance on the part of the loved one. The father's love seemed always to have a price, while in contrast, the mother's love was freely given. Personal testimony: "We always had to kneel when we took Dad a glass of water. We would hand it to him and drop to our knees until he handed back the empty glass. One time my sister did not get water fast enough to suit Dad and he spit the water back in her face." Manhattan families were reared in varying degrees of that totalitarian belief. In some cases, however, roles were reversed, and it was the mother who was the

disciplinarian and who demanded the strict respect while the father dispensed love "without a price."

Fragmentation of the Mexican family (community) began in the middle 1940s. Although the women who were getting married at that time were marrying from their ethnic group, the men began marrying Anglo women. This could be, in part, because Manhattan's Mexican ethnic community was very small and there were few young people who were not related. Another reason was that the population was not mobile, and so their choices were limited to Manhattan and the surrounding area. Then, in the middle 1950s, the women of the Mexican ethnic group began to marry Anglo men. The ones who married in the 1940s and 1950s were not mobile and tended to remain in Manhattan. Those who married in the 1960s also married Anglos, however, some married within their own ethnic group. Some married military men who had been stationed at Ft. Riley. Those marrying in the 1970s also married Anglos and most stayed in Manhattan although those who graduated from college did move to other states to pursue their careers. Towards the end of the 1970s, there was a slight change in the trend and some of the young people married within their own ethnic group or Hispanic culture. Note, however, that those they married were not from Manhattan.

What now remains of the Mexican culture brought by those immigrants are only a few of the old traditions: an anniversary dance with a mariachi band, a wedding dance, birthdays and baptisms to name a few. One could say that life for Manhattan's Mexican American community today is unlike that of the first families that settled here. As could be expected, the immigrants and their descendants gradually assimilated and acquired many of the dominant society's customs and culture and modified some of their more traditional ones. Yet, each culture exchanges some appreciation for the other. The popularity of Mexican foods and a highly respected work ethnic are not the least of the contributions Mexican Americans have made to the Manhattan community.

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