Alliance

AN ETHNIC NEWSPAPER AT KSU

April 1985

MEXICAN AMERICANS FIND SPACE IN KANSAS

PART ONE

The last major immigrant group to enter Kansas--the Mexican--is also becoming the largest. Mexican-American communities can be found in all parts of the state: in the Argentine area of Kansas City and Topeka's "Little Mexico" in the east, to Wichita and Emporia in the south, and to Dodge City and Garden City in the west.

The history of Mexican immigration is closely related to the history of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad in the state. Most Mexicans were employed at some point by the railroad. Their communities were usually located along the railroad lines, often literally on the wrong side of the tracks.

Jesus Ramirez, who came to Kansas to work on the railroad in 1916, recalls his early days of hard labor.

"There was much work to do for the railroad. But it is never in the books or papers that the Mexicans built the railroad. And we had no machines, only hands."

As early as 1903, the railroad began hiring Mexicans to work in its extra labor and section gangs. By 1907, Mexicans were actively recruited to come to the United States to work. They were often met at border towns by recruiters who tried to entice them into signing with their companies by promising transportation, a home and work. One eighty-year-old man recalled his experience when he arrived in El Paso in 1917.

"There were two employment offices in which Mexican people come in. You sign your name and then they tell you, 'All right, you stay here. You come back to this office every day for your meals. We have to have so many men to transfer you out to where you want to work.'

"So you stay there about a week or maybe three days--it all depends how many men they needed . . . When they have the amount of men they needed, they shooed them out to different places, different jobs."

At first, those who ventured northward to work in Kansas were the "solos," single men or men traveling without their families. Those hired as laborers on the extra gangs were on the lowest rung of the employment ladder in the railroad hierarchy. They were used primarily on a short-term basis to work up and down the line on repairs and to lay new track. They were laid off every fall before bad weather set in. They were then taken back to Texas.

Many would return to their families in Mexico to wait until they could be rehired in the spring. Some would work in the sugar beet fields near Garden City; others were lured by jobs in the salt mines at Hutchinson and Lyons, the meat-packing houses in Kansas City and Wichita or the coal mines of Parsons and Chanute. The men who found work on the section crews had a somewhat more stable existence than the nomadic track workers, although they, too, normally worked only on a seasonal basis. These crews were charged with maintaining a ten-to-twelve-mile section of track. They usually lived alongside the track.

By 1912, the Santa Fe began hiring Mexicans to work year-round as laborers in the railroad shops and roundhouses. As a result, the workers were able to settle down and form more permanent communities. At first, Mexican railroad workers were housed in boxcars beside the tracks. Boxcar colonies sprang up along railroad sidings in Topeka, Kansas City, Emporia, Chanute and other cities. These were replaced by section houses, crudely built but better than boxcars. The men were encouraged to send for their families. One former railroad worker remembered the section house in which he and his family lived.

"It was a cement house, but it had enough rooms, and there was enough ventilation, windows, doors. We had two small rooms and a long room. The bath was the same thing--a big washtub for everybody," he said. "We didn't have electric lights--we had kerosene lamps . . . the heat was produced by the heaters that we bought and the stove in the kitchen."

Apart from the railroad recruiters, what prompted Mexicans to cross the border in the early part of the century?

"Most immigrants came to Kansas seeking better jobs . . . In 1907, Mexico's economy was victimized by a severe depression, and many workers were laid off," said Robert Oppenheimer, professor of history at the University of Kansas. "By 1910, the harsh conditions of poverty and the Mexican Revolution motivated many workers and their families to leave Mexico for at least temporary, if not permanent shelter in the United States.

With the Revolution and the disorder that engulfed Mexico, many Mexicans cut their ties to the old country. Some no longer had relatives in Mexico or had lost touch with friends. As they began to put down roots and start families here, their interest in going back to Mexico dwindled.

By 1917 and the coming of World War I, even more Mexicans were attracted to the United States. Jobs became plentiful because of severe labor shortages in the railroad industry. But the labor boom brought on by the war was followed by the Depression. Although many Mexicans returned to Mexico at this time, the majority remained in Kansas.

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HISPANIC HERITAGE WEEK

K-State's annual Hispanic Heritage celebration will take place in late April. Watch for details on posted signs on campus.

Also: This year will mark the 17th year that National Hispanic Heritage Week has been celebrated at the national level. The commemorative celebration, mandated by Congress and proclaimed by the President is always around the second week in September. This year it is September 15-21.

For information on how to participate, contact Gilbert Chavez, Director of Hispanic Concerns Staff at (202) 245-8467.

All Colored People

THAT WANT TO

GO TO KANSAS,

On September 5th, 1877,

Can do so for $5.00

IMMIGRATION.

WHEREAS, We. the colored people of Lexington, Ky,. knowing that there is an abundance of choice lands now belonging to the Government, have assembled ourselves together for the purpose of locating on said lands. Therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, That we do now organize ourselves into a Colony, as follows:—Any person wishing to become a member of this Colony can do so by paying the sum of one dollar ($1.00), and this money is to be paid by the first of September, 1877, in instalments of twenty-five cents at a time, or otherwise as may be desired.

RESOLVED. That this Colony has agreed to consolidate itself with the Nicodemus Towns, Solomon Valley, Graham County, Kansas, and can only do so by entering the vacant lands now in their midst, which costs $5.00.

RESOLVED, That this Colony shall consist of seven officers—President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and three Trustees. President—M. M. Bell; Vice-President—Isaac Talbott; Secretary—W. J. Niles; Treasurer—Daniel Clarke; Trustees—Jerry Lee, William Jones, and Abner Webster.

RESOLVED, That this Colony shall have from one to two hundred militia, more or less, as the case may require, to keep peace and order, and any member failing to pay in his dues, as aforesaid, or failing to comply with the above rules in any particular, will not be recognized or protected by the Colony.

Posters such as this encouraged emancipated slaves to settle in Kansas. The Nicodemus community, Graham county, Kansas, was settled by Blacks from Kentucky. (Photo from the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka).

Part 2

The Black Community In Early Manhattan

Establishment of the Black Neighborhood

"No document can be found that will explicitly reveal the area of Manhattan in which the Black pioneers established their homes," said KSU historian, Dr. Nupur Chaudhuri, in her recent oral history of the Manhattan Black Community. However, it is known that "the first Black church, known as the Second Methodist Episcopal Church, was built in 1866 at the corner of Sixth and El Paso."

Chaudhuri said that by 1880 a large Black population had settled in the southwest part of Manhattan. When asked why Blacks moved to the south side, one of the oral history project respondents replied, "Segregation."

"They (the White population) got all the Black people and they got this land together and we are all pushed back over here so that is why this is our part of town," the respondent said. "That was where everyone was, every family; they each had so much land, and that was just where all the Black people were, and families. We had our own churches, we had our school."

Another interviewee said "they (the White population) just wanted Blacks south of Poyntz, kind of like in a little settlement."

Boundaries

"This segregation forced some families, who were related either by birth or by marriage, to live in close quarters," Chaudhuri said. One of the project interviewees described her neighborhood on Yuma Street: "Everybody was kin around us. . ." she said. "My grandmother lived right there on the corner. . .my grandmother's sister lived next door to us."

The segregated Afro-American families depended on each other for help and mutual support, Chaudhuri said. One of the senior citizen respondents said, "In those days everybody looked after everybody's children. You didn't do anything that you got away with; somebody told your parents. They would correct you and they would also tell on you . . . We are sort of like one family, we just all stuck together, everybody got along pretty well."

Chaudhuri said this feeling of one family, however, sometimes created problems for maturing young people. "We all seem like brothers and sisters, more like a family and we just didn't have nothing to choose from because we was around each other all the time . . ." a respondent said.

Education

"Little is known about the education of Black children in Manhattan before 1879," Chaudhuri said. "We can only presume that during the 1860's and 1870's the Blacks in this town shared the feelings of many Blacks in the state who believed that only through education would they be able to achieve economic prosperity and social status."

Chaudhuri said the education of Blacks in Kansas was determined by White attitudes toward the Blacks. "Most Whites also believed that the Blacks should be educated. Their

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MANHATTAN'S BLACK SETTLERS

(From p. 1)

reasons for educating the Afro-Americans varied," she said. "Some argued that through education Blacks would become good and useful citizens of the society. Others felt that Blacks were potential threats to the safety of the community and educating them would enhance the security of the society."

"During the early 1860's in Kansas the only schools opened to Blacks were privately supported freedman's schools or evening schools," Chaudhuri said. But by the mid- 1860's the number of Black people in the area began to increase and, with the rise of the population, the charity school could not accommodate all of the Black children, she said. As a result, public schools were supposed to begin providing education for Black children.

"Many White citizens did not want to integrate public schools because they believed that 'mixed education' implied social equality and they were not ready to accept that," Chaudhuri said. "In 1867, the Kansas legislature passed a law which supported separate-but-equal education for both Black and White children." At first separate schools were only allowed in first class cities, she said, but by 1868 second class cities were allowed to have separate schools, too.

Since the number of Black children in Manhattan in the 1860's and 1870's was not large, Chaudhuri said it is probably safe to conclude that they went to school with White children.

"Mrs. Ellen Ellsworth-Martin, daughter of Josiah Pillsbury, an early settler in Manhattan, went to school with Black children," she said. "In her reminiscences she wrote about attending the funeral of one of her Black classmates--ten or eleven-year-old Tom, son of Kate Noris."

"According to Ellen Ellsworth-Martin the children laid bunches of flowers on the casket and their teacher helped them to pick the flowers for the casket," Chaudhuri said. Ellen wrote, "That was the first tragedy that came into our young lives and I never forgot it."

"This account indicates that there was some interaction between the White and the Black children or at least the teacher encouraged certain closeness among children," Chaudhuri said.

After the 1879 Exodus, the number of Black children in Manhattan increased considerably. "Consequently, the white community had to deal with the question of integrating the school system," Chaudhuri said.

Project reports show that on August 22, 1879 The Manhattan Enterprise, a newspaper of the day, published the following report on a school board meeting: "The annual school meeting was held at the new school house last Thursday. There was a very small attendance. Among the questions which came up was whether the colored scholars should have separate apartments from the whites. It was decided not."

"From the reports published in The Mercury in the 1880's a rough picture regarding the education of Black children in this town can be drawn," Chaudhuri said. The July 16, 1884 issue of The Mercury identified Miss Selina Wilson (who came here from Arizona) as Manhattan's Black teacher and W.J. Mitchell as her assistant. Chaudhuri said records indicate that by 1886, the number of Black students had risen to 47 and Wilson was their teacher. On June 16, 1886 The Mercury announced that "Selma Wilson" was the principal of the Black children and Eli Freeman was the second teacher.

The Black children went to the same school, Chaudhuri said, but it seems their classes were held separately from the White children.

By 1901 Chaudhuri said the number of Black students had risen to 137. In 1902 it fell to 111 and by 1903 the number decreased to 107. Of the 107, 56 were male and 51 were female.

"The first reference to a separate school for Black children can be found in the minutes of the Board of Education meeting on July 6, 1903," Chaudhuri said. "Eli C. Freeman and Eli Cruise representing the Americus Club were present and presented views of that club regarding separate school for colored pupils," the report said. Chaudhuri said that on August 3, 1903 a motion was made at the Board meeting to build a two-room building.

by Kenyon Madden

"Everyone in the Black community, however, was not enthusiastic about segregated education for the Black children," Chaudhuri said. Study records show that at the regular Board meeting in September 1903 "a committee of colored people was present and presented a remonstrance against the building of a separate building for the colored pupils." This presentation did not stop the Board of Education from proceeding with its plan, she said.

The Mercury of January 13, 1904 reported that the new Douglass School was opened on January 4, 1904 and 60 children attended the school. Students went to Douglass School up to the 7th grade and after that they went to integrated junior and senior high school, Chaudhuri said.

Some of the senior citizens interviewed for the oral history project told Chauduri that their experiences in the integrated school system were not pleasant. She said one interviewee, remembering her high school days, said, "In high school when we went to the auditorium for the assembly they would always sit us in the back. Even though the school was integrated."

"According to one interviewee most boys didn't go beyond 7th or 8th grade and the girls also often did not finish high school," Chaudhuri said. She said one senior citizen touched on a possible reason: "Well, I really don't think it made much difference that whether you (were) taught in the school, course wages were low at that time so I really couldn't say. . . . most of the ladies cooked in the fraternities and sororities and the men were janitors. I don't think it made any difference about your education."

Employment

The 1890 and 1900 census data show that most Afro-American men in the Manhattan area were employed as laborers. The women, who worked for wages, were hired as domestics or cooks, Chaudhuri said.

"The Afro-American senior citizens who were interviewed often held jobs similar to their predecessors," Chaudhuri said. "Most of the men worked as laborers or janitors for local banks, City of Manhattan, Kansas State Agricultural College, for local contractors or for local businessmen," she said. There were exceptions. One Black man was in the 9th Cavalry, another played professional baseball for the Kansas City Monarchs; there was a candy maker and a movie projector operator.

Many interviewees told Chaudhuri their mothers did not work for wages. One respondent said, "In those days men didn't believe in their wives working. Their place was in the home raising children." One person said that when the children became a little older her mother occasionally worked as a cook. Another said her mother took in laundry.

"One respondent stated that in the 1920s as a domestic she received 25 cents per hour," Chaudhuri said. In the 1930s one woman worked for $5.00 a week and her mother worked for $4.50 per week.

Religious Activities

"Before emancipation when the society at large systematically excluded the Blacks, church was perhaps the only institute which provided the needed temporal and religious sustenance," Chaudhuri said. "With the continuation of segregation, the churches continued to serve their purposes and religion played a major role in defining and shaping Afro-American social and cultural heritage.

"The Afro-American community of Manhattan was no exception to this national trend," Chaudhuri said. "One church was built before the Exodus and three more churches were constructed after the Exodus. The Shepard Chapel, built before the Exodus of 1879, was the first Black church in the city. It was originally organized as a mission church in 1866 and it was called the Second Methodist Episcopal Church," she said.

"The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in October 1879 and a wooden frame building was erected at 401 Yuma Street in 1880," Chaudhuri said. In March 1880, a group of Blacks began to conduct worship services in Avenue School (present site of the Middle School), she said. This congregation was organized by the First Baptist Church and named it the Second Baptist Church or Colored Baptist Church.

Chaudhuri said that in 1920 the Second Baptist Church merged with Mount Zion Baptist Church and the reorganized Church was named Pilgrim Baptist Church.

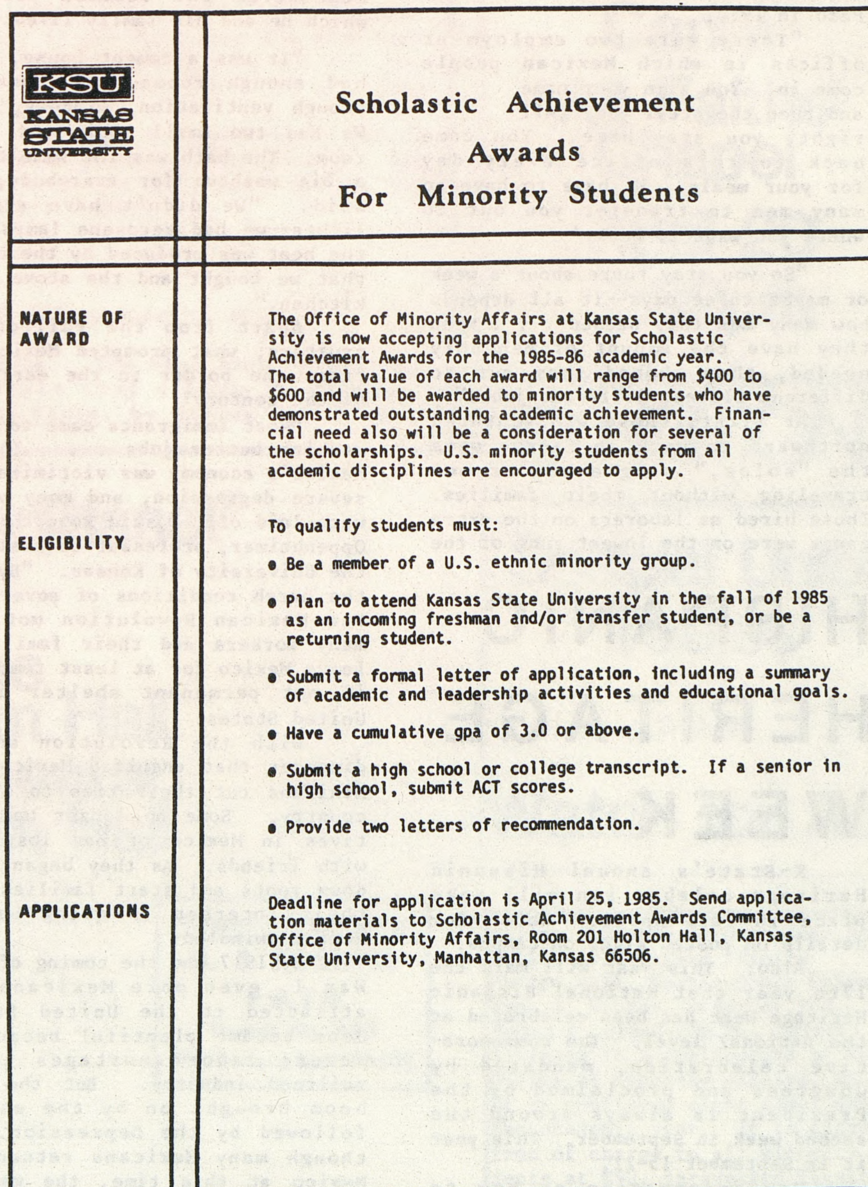
"Besides fulfilling the religious needs, the churches played an important role in solidifying the social bond among the Afro-Americans," Chaudhuri said. "Because of that the Black ministers decided to take turns organizing the church programs so the community could attend the same church on a particular Sunday," she said.

Chaudhuri said one respondent, in describing her childhood, said, "I think we hardly ever went out of our block, and that's where we would go would be church. We went to church quite often, you know we use to give quite a few things in the basement of the church; we also had hayrides and carnivals . . . There was always something going on for the kids in our church."

"Over and over the senior citizens emphasized the importance of church in their childhood," Chaudhuri said. One said, "We were just raised up in the church and the church was just full, and just active and everything. We had our league, we had our regular meetings. . ."

And the church remains important to them, Chaudhuri said, as we see from the remarks of another project participant: "The important part of my life is church . . . I feel that it gives me strength, something to go on. I go to church on Sunday and to hear the sermon and have fellowship with other people . . . I feel it's very important."

(Once again Alliance would like to thank Dr. Chaudhuri, K-State Historian, for sharing this preliminary report on her oral history of the Manhattan Black community. The project was funded in part by the Kansas Committee for the Humanities. Part I of this report was published in the March 1985 issue of Alliance. A limited number of copies are available on request.)



KANSAS HISPANICS (From p. 1)

"They worked whenever possible in industry or at odd-jobs. More females and children worked to help support the family," said Oppenheimer. "In May, for example, children often left school as their families traveled to harvest beets and wheat, and they returned to school in October to November."

"Finally, families, friends, and relatives often shared their meager earnings so that all would have something."

PART TWO

The status of Mexican-Americans in Kansas has improved since they first arrived in large numbers around the turn of the century to work as railroad laborers, but equality has not yet been realized.

The Mexicans settled into boxcar colonies that sprang up along railroad lines in several Kansas communities. Later, section houses were built by the railroad to replace the boxcars, and the immigrants began moving into other housing nearby.

This movement took place within a small area, and the more permanent settlements took on the character of Mexican villages.

A description of the Kansas City, Kansas, community, or "barrio," known as the Argentine could also describe the barrios in Topeka, Emporia, or wherever the Mexican immigrants settled.

"Segregation was the rule, whether in residential, educational, religious, recreational, or social circles. Mexicans lived in a world apart as 'urban villagers' . . . they remained in a Mexican setting and continued to function more or less as they had in Mexico . . . They remained intensely loyal to their families, their religion, and to their native communities."

Many of the residents of one barrio were from the same area of Mexico. An estimated 60 to 70% of the Mexican-Americans in Topeka came from Guanajuato in central Mexico. A large number of those in the Argentine were from Michoacan, also in the central region. This wholesale relocation helped cement the bonds of community solidarity.

Mexicans have been criticized for their apparent clannishness. People complain that many immigrants never learn English or try to assimilate themselves into American life. But, what did the Mexicans have to look forward to when they ventured out of the barrio? They found they were not welcome in many restaurants, schools, theaters, barber shops, swimming pools, and churches.

For example, in Lyons, Kansas, Mexican-Americans recalled that they were only allowed to swim in the public pool on the day the water was changed. "We had to swim like hell before the water drained out," recalled one former resident.

When they first came to the United States, most Mexicans were illiterate in English. Children starting school were given virtually no help in English and had to struggle along as best they could.

"I remember starting the first grade at the age of seven . . . with nothing but Spanish as my first language," recalls one Mexican-American.

"They detained me in first grade two straight years, and then when I finally got into the second grade, they passed me from the second grade to the third grade. And there again, I was retained another two years.

"And the reason why I failed all the time was by the time I learned to speak English, to learn the alphabet, to learn to read, to learn to write, I was just getting further and further behind."

Many Mexican children never overcame the language barrier, because most schools for Mexicans were segregated. In addition, many felt that an education or even a high school diploma would do them no good. They still wouldn't be able to get better jobs.

After World War II, some of the barriers began to crumble. Returning Mexican-American servicemen were no longer willing to remain outcasts in the society they had fought for.

Mexican-Americans also reaped benefits from the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Slowly, Mexican-Americans were becoming more visible outside the barrio.

In 1968, Jim Martinez of Hutchinson became the first Mexican-American city commissioner and mayor in Kansas. In the 1970s, D. C. Garcia became the mayor of Garden City.

Mexican-Americans have become teachers, social workers, lawyers, engineers, government employees, and owners of restaurants and businesses.

Through annual "fiestas" in many communities, non-Mexicans get the chance to learn about the heritage of their Mexican-American neighbors. Numerous fiestas are held on September 16, Mexican Independence Day.

Garden City, the Fiesta Capital of Kansas, has had a fiesta on this day for about 55 years.

The Topeka Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe hosts its annual celebration in July. The public is invited to sample Mexican food and enjoy Mexican dancing and music.

Despite some strides, Professor Robert Oppenheimer believes Mexican-Americans in Kansas are still subject to prejudice and discrimination.

"Generally Mexican-Americans remain in large numbers in the lower economic strata of Kansas society. Until prejudices are understood and dealt with, Mexican-Americans will have only limited potential of upward mobility in Kansas, and as they become our largest ethnic and racial minority, their integration will become an increasingly more important issue with which we must deal."

Kansas Immigrant Series,
University of Kansas, March 1982

NATIONAL HISPANIC LEADERS ORGANIZE

Eleven Hispanic college and university presidents and other top-level administrators met together for the first time in March 1985 at a meeting of the Hispanic Caucus of the American Association for Higher Education. The new, as yet unnamed, coalition plans to meet regularly. Those present say they also hope to add as many as 28 more members from Hispanic community college ranks.

The purpose of the group is to add to on-going efforts to develop strategies for increasing opportunities for Hispanics in higher education.

One primary goal is to increase the number of Hispanic faculty members and administrators at colleges and universities around the country. Hispanic students need to have people to service them, said Hector Garza, Chairman of the Caucus and Assistant Graduate Dean at Eastern Michigan University. "We have to build a base to serve the needs of those students."

The new group, as well as the Hispanic Caucus, will also work to "sensitize non-Hispanic administrators in relating to Hispanics in higher education," Garza said.

In the three years since the Hispanic Caucus of the American Association for Higher Education was established, participation has increased three-fold, to 125 administrators and faculty members.

Garza said that Hispanics are demonstrating that "we do have a strong power base to make sure that higher education is more responsive to the needs of Hispanics."

Present members of the new group are: Juan Aragon, President, New Mexico Highlands University; Tomas A. Arciniega, President, California State University, Bakersfield; Josue Castillo-Mercado, Manager of the Puerto Rico division, University of Phoenix; Alfredo G. De Los Santos, Vice-Chancellor, Maricopa County Community College; Gary D. Keller, Provost, State University of New York at Binghamton; Arturo Madrid, Director of Tomas Rivera Center, Claremont College; Ernest A. Martinez, President, Seattle Central Community College; Miguel A. Nevarez, President, Pan American University; Enrique Pineir Echevarria, President, Instituto Commercial de Puerto Rico Junior College; Michael Saenz, President, Tarrant County Junior College; Faustina Solis, Provost, University of California at San Diego. (CHRONICLE, 3/27/85)

Political Women

A NEW FILM: "Not One of the Boys," a film about women in politics produced by the Center for the American Woman and Politics at Rutgers University, is now available for classroom and meeting use.

The hour-long film, first seen in the PBS "Frontline" series last fall, looks at what it calls "the year of the woman" in American politics--1984.

"In an era of important change, the film casts a spotlight on one extraordinary year and focuses on major developments for women in politics," said Ruth B. Mandel, Director of the Rutgers Center.

For information about purchase or rental of a videocassette of the film, contact Kay Stanwick at the Center for the American Woman in Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903 (CHRONICLE, 2/27/85).

Language

English Today is the name of a new magazine devoted to the English language. ET, as its editors call it, is for scholars as well as lay readers, and will include everything about the language from history to geography, literature and usage to its relationship to other languages.

The first issue of the new quarterly advertises on the cover an article on the masculine bias in the language, perceptions of English abroad, world English, and "An ABC of English--America to Australia."

English Today--The International review of the English language is published by Cambridge University Press and edited by Tom McArthur. Annual subscriptions cost $18.50.

English is the "mother tongue" of more than 300 million people in the world today. Over one billion more speak it as a second language.

JARRETT AWARDED

By Ken Brogdon

A Kansas City engineering student at Kansas State University is the winner of a national fellowship which aids minority students in graduate school.

David W. Jarrett, senior in electrical and computer engineering, is one of 145 students to receive assistance from the National Consortium for Graduate Degrees for Minorities in Engineering, Inc.

The award provides opportunities for minority students to pursue graduate studies at the master's degree level in engineering through a program of paid summer internships and financial aid.

Jarrett's fellowship will pay tuition and fees, plus an annual stipend of $5,000 an academic year. He also will be assigned to a summer internship.

Jarrett is the son of Audrey Jarrett, 933 Haskell Avenue, Kansas City.

Fraternity Awards Two

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity at Kansas State University has awarded two scholarships this spring.

The 1984-85 Dean Harris Scholastic Achievement Award went to Monique Scroggins, senior at Manhattan High School and a member of KSU Upward Bound Program. She is the daughter of Marilyn Scroggins of Prairie Glen Place in Manhattan. The award is $100.

Elonda Clay, K-State freshman in electrical engineering technology from 2948 E 30th Street, Kansas City, Missouri, received the Outstanding Accomplishment in Scholastic Achievement Award for $100.

Put your degree to work where it can do a world of good.

Your first job after graduation should offer more than just a paycheck.

If you're graduating this year, look into a unique opportunity to put your degree to work where it can do a world of good. Look into the Peace Corps.

The toughest job you'll ever love

PEACE CORPS

WHAT IS MECHA?

MEChA (Movimiento Estudantil Chicano de Aztlan)

Purpose of MEChA

1) To further the spirit of cooperation and friendliness among la Raza students.

2) To motivate and counsel pre-college students toward furthering their education.

3) To sponsor activities aimed toward intellectual and social development.

4) To advise and counsel members and prospective members.

5) To emphasize our culture, language, and traditions.

There are 287 Hispanic American persons on campus. MEChA has an actual membership of 25 students with an additional 40 assisting in a variety of projects.

Read/ability

Every other person I've talked to lately is struggling to write a report or a term paper, and it reminded me of my own miseries learning to write a simple, straight-forward sentence.

I guess it's unavoidable that those of us who learn to write in an academic setting, (i.e. almost all of us) also learn an academic writing style. That's too bad because where *few words, small words, active verbs, and concrete examples* are the guiding principles of successful communicators--academics teach the worship of Many, Big, Passive, and Abstract.

It's easy to spot many words and big words. Do you realize, for example, that the Lord's Prayer has 56 words; the Gettysburg Address has 268 words; the Declaration of Independence has 1,322 words; and a completely unintelligible government regulation on the sale of cabbage has 26,911 words?

Here's an example of "Big and Many" from psychology: "On the one side we have the free personality: by definition it is not neurotic, for it has neither conflict nor dream. Its desires, such as they are, are transparent, for they are just what institutional approval keeps in the forefront of consciousness. . ." (you get the idea). This paragraph also illustrates abstract words. Try to touch a "forefront of consciousness," for example.

Passive as opposed to active can be recognized when what you are trying to say seems buried. "The race was won by Zola Budd" is passive. "Zola Budd won the race" is active.

We are asked to make sense of long, convoluted sentences every single day in an academic setting, and, even outside it. We squint, read them again, and usually decide, "well, I don't understand, but it must be my problem."

And it's true that although the problem did not begin with us, we perpetuate it. If we read this kind of prose we tend to write it, too. I'm sure all of us have used a cumbersome phrase like, "In my opinion it is not an unjustifiable assumption that. . ." instead of "I think." And we tell ourselves the longer one sounds better.

Changing from the wordy, abstract style to a more clear and straightforward one seems to involve as much an attitude change as a technical one. I know it was for me. I began my studies with anthropologists who favored a pedantic style because it sounded more academic and, I admit, it was hard to let go of it.

I remember my first assignment in class one of Reporting One. I had decided I wanted to communicate with other people besides other anthropologists and realized doing so meant changing styles. But I really didn't know what that meant. On the first day I was asked to "go outside and describe something." Simple enough. I went outside and the one distinguishing characteristic that day, to me, was the wind. It was a day in late fall and Kansas was preparing for winter. The point around which my description revolved was the observation, "What an odd job fall wind has, stripping her friends for the cold."

Now, I think that line sounds like the Peanuts cartoon kid's description of a sunset: "The sun went down as red as a banana" but, at the time, I thought, "Great stuff." Proudly I turned in my paper, relieved that some unique observation had come to me "on demand." The next day the newspaper editor teacher returned my "D" paper full of red lines and x's with the word "friends" circled and the comment, "Do you mean the TREES?"

I almost decided, then and there, to return to academic gobbledy-gook, no matter how awful it was. . . .at least they appreciated poetry! But what I learned from being forced to be concrete was that writing clearly is hard work; it means nothing short of thinking clearly. The key to straightforward writing is knowing what you want to say.

George Orwell, author of the novel 1984, wrote an article about language and politics in which he said much modern writing consists of vague, meaningless phrases "tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house." He said apart from ugliness, two qualities are common to this kind of style. They are staleness of imagery and lack of precision.

"The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he. . . is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not," Orwell said. "This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially any kind of political writing."

Orwell said writing is too full of "ready-made phrases." He also believed that vague abstractions and over-used phrases are sometimes used on purpose--not to communicate but to keep people from thinking. As all students and politician's know, it's much easier to conceal both ignorance and precise meaning in abstract and cliche-ridden ramblings. Orwell said people who continually read and write ready-made phrases no longer think for themselves.

"A scrupulous writer," Orwell said, "in every sentence that he writes, he will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more clearly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

(In the thirty-five years since Orwell wrote this essay we have also learned to recognize sexist language, something no one thought of in 1950. Using "he" all of the time alludes only to males in our minds, regardless of what grammar rules try to tell us.)

The problem for most of us arrives when we sit down, pen in hand, behind a blank page. It seems impossible to think clearly at a time like that. How do we know what we want to say, and how can we write it clearly the first time? The answer for most of us is, we can't.

In the movie "Amadeus" we saw Mozart write entire musical scores in his head and then transcribe them, without change, to the page. But most of us don't think that way. Many writers tell us, in fact, that the reason they write is to find out what they think.

Orwell said we need to know what we want to say and then choose the words and images that make our meaning clear.

What if we don't know what we think?

I once worked for an old man who had written for a living his entire lifetime, and the one lesson he gave me about writing was, "Never approach writing ceremoniously." I'm afraid that's what we tend to do with a blank page looming there, waiting to be filled with not just clear, but profound ideas. That approach is the one he meant not to take.

The goal, then, is to study; think about the direction you want your thoughts to travel; then "just write." Don't try to avoid thinking or jive anyone (especially yourself) with gobbledy-gook phrases. Don't stop and look back to see how it sounds. You can write pages if you want because you are not composing your final version--you are finding out what you think. Or, in the case of research papers, you are finding out what other people think, then what you think.

After finishing that process, read it and ask, "Okay, what is it I am trying to say?" Pretend you are going to explain it to a young child and write down--as directly as possible--your meaning. That, is the beginning of your term paper.

Probably you have lots of material you can use to fill in the detail. Now that you know your meaning, you can go to books and find pertinent quotes. You can sit back and think of exactly the image that will best explain or illustrate a point or an example. But, if you have done the work (and it is work) of figuring out what you think, then you can write it clearly.

If your professor tells you it doesn't sound academic enough, let me know and I'll send him or her Orwell's essay.

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*Note: The best book on writing style that I know is Elements of Style, by Strunk and White.)

STYLE

Literary scholars often hold Samuel Johnson up for emulation--then fail to emulate him themselves, noted a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education marking the bicentennial of Johnson's death.

At a meeting of Modern Language Association Richard B. Schwartz told the group that Johnson was a professional writer, "not a skittish Renaissance nobleman circulating sonnets among his friends...."

"Both in demeanor and in intelectual practice there are gulfs--perhaps even chasms--between ourselves and Johnson," he said. If Johnson were our model, Schwartz said, it would require the "deprofessionalition of literary study, for one cannot follow Johnson into all of the realms of his interest and continue to devote all of one's waking hours to the unending pusuit of a single narrowly defined subject."

It would also require a critic to adopt one of Johnson's major concerns as a professional writer, the article said--"that his audience be amused and engaged and, most important of all, continue to turn pages."

The academic too often "has no qualms" about abandoning his responsibility to engage his audience, Schwartz said. "The reader is expected to steel himself for the task at hand and swallow every drop of the good medicine which the professional critic is forcing him to ingest."

HISPANIC HERITAGE WEEK

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7:30pm

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7:30pm, Forum Hall

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