RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Mexican women attending a class in English presented by the St. Paul WPA's adult education department—April 23, 1936.

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RAMSEY COUNTY

History

Volume 27, Number 3 Fall, 1992

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* matches in diversity the variegated fall colors we now see all around us. Jane McClure writes in fascinating detail about the history of our Mexican American neighbors on the West Side of St. Paul. Tom Buckley reminds us that the presidential election of 1896, matching Republican McKinley with Democrat Bryan, involved in its day as much hoopla, politics and suspense as the election of 1992 appears to have so far.

Two of our regular features—Growing Up in St. Paul and the Historic Site essay—highlight the colorful East Side neighborhood. And finally we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church and its century of service to St. Paul's African American community in A Matter of Time for 1892. The Editorial Board hopes you will enjoy the richness of Ramsey County's history found in this issue.

—*John M. Lindley,* chairman, Editorial Board

A Story of Change, Pride, Perseverance

The Mexican-Americans and Their Roots in S

Jane McClure

"There are always some people who knock the work, and try to undo what we do." That lament may sound familiar to anyone who has worked for the betterment of a community and its people. It could have been said yesterday in any one of St. Paul's neighborhoods, including the Lower West Side.

The speaker was indeed a proud West Sider, but the sentiment is not a new one. The speaker was Luis Garzon, the year was 1928. Garzon and other community leaders were trying to promote a social club for the West Side's Mexican and Mexican-American community. Their goal was to bring the newcomers together, and help them become more involved in neighborhood and city affairs. The gatherings also were seen as vital to preserving and promoting Mexican culture.

The story of the West Side, and particularly the flats or the Lower West Side neighborhood, has long been one of change, pride and perseverance. One group that has exemplified those successes and struggles is the neighborhood's Hispanic community, most of whom share a common Mexican and Mexican-American background.*

Although Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are among St. Paul's more recent arrivals, the West Side's Mexican roots may actually be traced back to the Treaty of Paris. Signed in 1763, the treaty brought an end to the war between Great Britain and France, known in Europe as the Seven Years' War, and on the American continent as the French and Indian War.

France ceded to Spain the land west of the Mississippi river and north to the 49th Parallel – including the site of today's West Side. Spain's new acquisition became part of the Vice Royalty of New Spain, which eventually became the independent nation of Mexico. The rest of what is now St. Paul – the east bank – lay in territory the French surrendered to the British under terms of that same treaty.*

Census records indicate that the first people of Mexican heritage came to Minnesota around 1860. Between that report and the count at century's end, the state's Mexican population inched from two to twenty-four people. One of those early arrivals would eventually rise to prominence, in the Mexican community and in the Twin Cities musical community. In 1886, Luis Garzon, a nineteen-year-old oboe player, traveled from Mexico City to Minneapolis where he and fellow band members performed at the gala Industrial Exposition.

For much of the rest of his life, Garzon would call the Twin Cities home. He joined the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, and also performed with theater orchestras and community bands. When the West Side Mexican community began taking shape, Garzon opened a grocery store there. His bright blue store stood on East Fairfield Street, just east of the intersection of State Street, in the old West Side flats neighborhood. Longtime neighborhood residents recall the store and its owner's role in the everyday life there.

"[Garzon] is the principal figure in the colony, and is a tireless worker for the betterment of the people. His store is a combi-

** The Mississippi would again divide today's city into different territories less than 100 years later, when the area east of the river became part of Wisconsin Territory and the west bank lay at the northern edge of Iowa Territory.*

** Mexican is used here to refer to persons born in Mexico, as well as a heritage. Mexican-American is the designation for those of Mexican descent who were born in the United States.*

Neighborhood House on the West Side in 1924.

n St. Paul's Past

"Sooner or later, to this store comes every Mexican that stays for any length of time in St. Paul . . ."

Children with musical instruments at Neighborhood House, about 1938.

nation grocery, business office, information bureau and club room, and is filled with many strange and unfamiliar works of art as well as edibles," a *St. Paul Pioneer Press* article reported in 1928.

Neighborhood children came to the store for treats, including candied squash (*dulce de calabaza*) and dried prickly pear pulp (*queso de tuna*). Their parents bought staples including pinto beans, peppers, flour and spices. Cornhusks for tamales could be found in neatly stacked burlap bags. In the front window, Garzon displayed green, red and white strips of paper, symbolic of the flag of Mexico.

"Sooner or later, to this store comes every Mexican that stays for any length of time in St. Paul, and they come for all purposes," the *Pioneer Press* article stated. "Sometimes to gossip, again to ask advice, nearly always to buy, so that the store is seldom empty, and soft, gliding words of Spanish are always to be heard."

By the time the newspaper reporter visited Garzon's store, the West Side's Mexican-American community had become well-established and the Lower West Side had become a miniature "League of Nations," as one lifelong resident described it. Eastern European Jews, Germans, Irish, Poles, Lebanese, Syrians, Greeks, Italians, African-Americans and a smattering of Scandinavians lived in the small frame houses, and did business in stores run by friends and neighbors.

"It was an integrated community long before anyone knew what the hell integration was," said West Side historian Bill Hoffman in a *Pioneer Press interview.* A native of the neighborhood, he went on to become director of community education and social work at the University of Minnesota. One of Hoffman's favorite fantasies involved placing the Statue of Liberty on top of the West Side bluffs, facing the Lower West Side.

The Goddess of Liberty would have gazed upon an area that has been described as St. Paul's Ellis Island. Virtually every immigrant group that has settled in the city has been represented, at one time or another, in the neighborhood. The story of the West Side's Mexican-American community begins with the history of the West Side itself and of other groups who had preceded the Mexican-Americans in establishing their homes there. Early maps indicate that the area was a burial ground for Native Americans. The French-Canadians had arrived when St. Paul was still a bend in the river known as "Pig's Eye," and the west bank of the river soon became home to German and Irish immigrants as well.

Although the homes, stores and churches of St. Paul and Ramsey County were just across the river, the first immigrants to settle on the west bank were residents of Dakota County. Historical sources differ as to why this tiny forerunner to the West Side was named West St. Paul. Most accounts attribute the name to the river, because the village was on the Mississippi's west bank or west side. However, a few sources indicate that the village, and West St. Paul Township to the south, were so named because they were west of the new community of South St. Paul.

Founded in 1858, the fledgling village of West St. Paul grew rapidly, with more than 400 residents in just a few years. But the young West St. Paul quickly ran into financial trouble. Many of its early buildings were in the low-lying river flats area, a place its Irish residents described as "the bogs." The expense of building roads and bridges, coupled with the costs of replacing the structures after each flood, soon put the community into debt. Work on the St. Paul Bridge (now replaced by the Wabasha Bridge) had to be halted by the village when the project grew too costly. The City of St. Paul finished the bridge in 1859, and opened it as a toll crossing.

The Minnesota Legislature intervened in West St. Paul's affairs in 1860, preventing the city from "incurring liabilities and expenses in any one year to exceed $1,500 for improvements of any and all kinds." But it was too late. West St. Paul's charter was repealed by state lawmakers in 1862 and the 600-plus citizens living there found themselves in a bureaucratic no-man's land.

West St. Paul was again part of West St. Paul Township. But not for long. The fifteen-cent tolls for the St. Paul Bridge were meeting increased protests from Dakota County farmers, and others who had to cross the bridge regularly. The founding of St. Michael's Catholic Church* on the West Side in 1868 has been linked to the prohibitive tolls, which were said to deter West St. Paul's Irish residents from attending services at the Cathedral of St. Paul downtown.

The debate somehow evolved into a plan to annex West St. Paul to Ramsey County and St. Paul. In turn, the bridge tolls would be lifted. Voters from both counties approved the annexation in late 1874, with overwhelming support from former West St. Paul residents (and opposition from much of the rest of Dakota County). Today's City of West St. Paul, formed out of the township's remaining forty acres, was founded in 1889.

Eight years after the West Side became St. Paul's Sixth Ward, Eastern European Jewish newcomers arrived there en masse. Pogroms and the continued threat of violence had made their homelands dangerous. Twice in 1882, jammed trains brought some 200 of these newcomers to St. Paul. The second group arrived in July of the same year, stretching the entire city's charitable resources and prompting a harsh warning to railroads about the importation of "paupers."

The new arrivals, deposited at St. Paul's Union Depot by railroad, had no food, no money and barely enough clothing. One quarter of them were children. None spoke English. The refugees, housed first in the old Railroad Immigration House near Third and Broadway and later at Franklin School, were transformed "from untidy immigrants to bright and cleanly American citizens," the *St. Paul Globe* reported. (And woe to the barber brought in to cut the children's hair, unintentionally offending parents by violating longstanding religious practice. Biblical law against cutting the corners of the hair's natural growth prompted many parents to let their children's earlocks grow, notes Jewish historian Gunther Plaut.)

A large number of these new arrivals moved across the river to the Lower West Side, living for a time in a tent village. By the 1890s, the West Side had become St. Paul's established Jewish community. Completion of the Robert Street Bridge brought in more residents, and the community spread out along the river. They lived side by side in modest homes, in a neighborhood crisscrossed by railroad tracks.

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The new arrivals, deposited at St. Paul's Union Depot by railroad, had no food, no money and barely enough clothing.

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Small businesses sprang up to meet the neighborhood's needs. Peddlers' wagons and the wagons driven by the rag pickers traveled the streets to buy and sell. A newspaper, which inexplicably called itself the *West St. Paul Times*, began publication in 1887. A variety of institutions opened their doors, including the Industrial School. Founded by the Mount Zion Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society in 1895, the school eventually evolved into the nonsectarian Neighborhood House.

In the future, Neighborhood House would have a profound influence on the Mexican-American community. These were the years when the West Side's reputation as an ethnically diverse community was set. Germans, Jews, Danes and other groups could worship there in their native tongues. For a time, special masses in French were held at St. Michael's Church to accommodate French-speaking residents of the neighborhood.

Although neighbors lived in relative harmony, there was at least one local indication of prejudice against some newcomers. The *West St. Paul Times* periodically ran notices of Ku Klux Klan meetings, along with the meeting notices of other "secret societies" and fraternal groups.

These were also the years when the Lower West Side became known as a transitional neighborhood for city newcomers. As residents bettered themselves, some moved out of their homes on the flats and into the West Side hills and bluff neighborhoods. Some of the homes they left behind became the first permanent Minnesota homes of the Mexican and Mexican-American community.

The lure of employment, coupled with unrest in their homeland due to the Mexican Revolution, prompted increasing numbers of Mexicans to migrate northward after 1910. Mexican-Americans, from Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico, joined them. Summer work in the sugar beet fields of the Red River Valley and the vegetable "truck farms" of the Minnesota Valley was plentiful. Minnesota may be the home of the Jolly Green Giant, but it was the sugar beet that spurred the demand for migrant labor.

The first migrant laborers to harvest beets in the 1880s and 1890s were Russian and German immigrants. They were joined by a small group of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans early in the twentieth century, as representatives of the Minnesota Sugar Company actively recruited workers in the southwestern United States. The company, forerunner of today's American Crystal Sugar Company, had opened a large new processing plant in Chaska in 1907. Recruiters from the company traveled the Southwest, offering migrant workers the chance to come to Minnesota and earn more money than could be had in Texas.

The first Mexican and Mexican-American workers in Minnesota worked the fields near Albert Lea, Chaska and Savage. Eventually, the demand for their labor would spread throughout the state and into northern Iowa, where sugar beets were grown to supply a processing plant in Mason City. Looking back, it is doubtful that the region's fledgling sugar beet and vegetable industries could have survived without the help of these workers, who labored as families in the hot sun. Even so, accounts from outstate newspapers either categorized the workers as curiosities or expressed veiled prejudice, attitudes that seem to have persisted throughout much of this century.

An account of a Mexican wedding, in the August 4, 1932, *Bricelyn Sentinel*, be-

** The original church tower survives today as the focal point for the Torre de San Miguel housing project.*

A choir of youngsters with their leaders, assembled in 1940 for the annual celebration of Mexican independence.

gan with the statement "Something a bit unusual was 'pulled off' in Bricelyn Wednesday evening. A newly married Mexican couple were host and hostess to the public at a dance given by them in the local dance hall. . . . "*

Between 1912 and 1916, more and more Mexicans and Mexican-Americans moved to permanent homes in St. Paul. Many would go to communities like Bricelyn and work in the fields during the summer. Their "homes" out in the fields were sometimes crude and ill-kept places. Families were crowded into shacks, chicken coops and other ramshackle buildings. Some lived in tents.

During the winter months in St. Paul, many of the men found work in the packing houses of South St. Paul and Newport, as well as in St. Paul industries and with the railroads. The first permanent Mexican settlement in St. Paul was in an area bounded by Fairfield, State and Indiana avenues. Others lived closer to the river. By 1920, almost 240 Mexicans lived in Minnesota and about seventy in St. Paul; their ranks would swell to about 350 during the winter months of 1925.

Some residents had come to stay after the First World War. The war brought demand for more laborers from the Southwest, as men of all races and ethnic groups left to serve their country. It should be noted, however, that West Siders, including some Mexican-Americans, also marched off to battle. Accounts in the old *West St. Paul Times* describe patriotic rallies held in the neighborhood, which were attended by diverse groups of residents.

Despite this show of pro-United States spirit, the West Side was one of several Sr. Paul neighborhoods targeted in 1917, when the city's branch of the National Association of Patriotic Instructors was formed. One purpose of this group was to "Americanize" aliens and instruct them in patriotism. Efforts included military recruiting and city gardening projects.

Despite the influx of Mexican and Mexican-American residents, the neighborhood was still predominantly Jewish during and after the First World War. A 1915 Neighborhood House study indicated that 71.9 percent of the area residents were Jews. Neighborhood House statistics from as late as 1933 reflect that continued presence. The statistics state that 21.8 percent of those attending their programs were Jewish, 17.3 percent were Germans, 14.5 percent were Mexican and 12.1 percent were Irish. (By that time the number of West Side African-Americans using Neighborhood House programs had dwindled markedly, though it should be remembered that the settlement house had served a significant part of the city's African-American population.)

But the Lower West Side was changing, and Neighborhood House rose to meet the challenge. More diverse programs were offered, with separate youth clubs for the different ethnic groups as well as shared activities. Adults could attend English language and "Americanization" classes. And of course, Neighborhood House served as

* *A complete account of the dance appears in Peg Meier's book,* Coffee Made Her Insane.

Vern Soash of Minnesota Federal handing out awards to children attending Lafayette school. This was the first public elementary school on the Lower West Side flats.

a home base for a variety of each ethnic community's activities.

The International Institute also was active on the West Side, often working in conjunction with Neighborhood House. In her book, *Around the World in St. Paul*, Alice Sickels describes an English class held in 1934, which was sponsored by the International Institute.

"A dozen adults came to the first meeting of an English class in the kitchen of one of the Mexican homes. The International Institute brought a large folding table, blackboards, school supplies, and a WPA teacher. Although the water had to be carried half a block, the floor had been scrubbed clean. Orange crates which the men carried home from the city market and the dump became chairs, tables, and fuel. The only light in the house that first night in November, 1934, was the glow of the fire through the open front of the stove and its top holes, from which the lids had been removed . . ."

The class, which later to moved to a house with electricity, grew to forty members by 1935. Sickels points out that many of those West Siders could read from the borrowed schoolbooks, and did pass the educational tests needed for United States citizenship.

By the time of that class, changing literacy requirements and other measures were in turn changing St. Paul's new immigrant population. Eastern European and Russian families found themselves welcoming far fewer countrymen and women. A literacy requirement for immigrants, passed in 1917, made its impact felt. But more dramatic were the changes wrought by the "quota acts" of the 1920s. First imposed in 1921, the quotas were restricted further in 1924 and 1929. One effect of these federal regulations was to reduce the number of Eastern Europeans and Russians arriving in this country. That in turn meant farmers and produce processing companies needed more laborers from the Southwest.

The use of more Mexican-American labor, coupled with the tightening of immigration laws, had an almost immediate impact upon the West Side. By 1921, the West Side flats area had more than doubled in population, with much of this increase attributed to those factors. Of the 3,636 Mexicans counted in Minnesota in 1930, 628 lived in St. Paul. A thesis by Lorraine Esterly Pierce, a former West Side resident who studied the flats community, indicates that more of their friends and countrymen would have joined them in St. Paul, had housing not been in short supply.

The Lower West Side was not only more diverse, it was also a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly crowded. The flat's first public elementary school, Lafayette, was severely cramped for space. A 1917 review of St. Paul's public schools indicated that the old frame school ranked lowest of the city's forty-nine elementary schools, with just 313 of 1,000 possible points for physical condition. That same year, the school had 667 pupils crammed into twelve rooms.

Families also packed into the neighborhood's small homes. It wasn't unusual to find two and three families, or two and three generations of the same family, liv-

ing together. Few West Siders of any ethnic origin would turn away a countryman, no matter how crowded conditions were.

The 1930s continued to be a time of great growth in the neighborhood's Mexican and Mexican-American population. Hundreds of newcomers arrived during that decade. Estimates of the number of residents of Mexican heritage differ, when we look at the 1930s statistics. Pierce's research indicated that 850 people of Mexican heritage lived in St. Paul by 1933, with 660 of those residents living on the West Side. By the late 1930s, she estimated, about 860 people of Mexican descent lived in the neighborhood.

The 1930s also were a time of trials and challenges. Troubles began in 1929 when the state of Texas passed a law demanding that would-be employers pay a state fee before recruiting help there. That added cost prompted migrant recruiters to think twice before seeking help in Texas.

The Great Depression also hit hard. Most families in the neighborhood had to live very frugally and migrant laboring families were lucky to earn a few hundred dollars for one summer's toil.

By 1933, Minnesota Sugar stopped guaranteeing wages, transportation and credit. Workers who had planned to return to southern homes were stranded in St. Paul; city residents and migrants alike lost jobs to the cutbacks and increased competition for work. In some rural Minnesota counties, it was not unusual to find signs indicating that only white laborers would be employed.

With jobs scarce, prejudice and suspicion took a terrible toll in the community. Some employers, including the railroads, no longer welcomed Mexican and Mexican-American workers. The United States Department of Labor asked employers to scrutinize these workers to determine whether they were in the United States legally. It was a far cry from the open arms and calls for workers the community had know scant years earlier.

St. Paul has the dubious distinction of being one of the first major cities in the United States to deport Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, in an attempt to remove people who were not naturalized citizens. What makes the episode especially appalling is that of the 328 people sent to Mexico in 1934, most children and many adults were indeed United States citizens, not aliens.

Another attempt at deportation was apparently considered in 1937, according to the St. Paul press. "1,500 Mexicans on Relief in City Will be Deported", a headline in the June 15, 1937, *St. Paul Daily News* declared. Under the heading were pictures of two children, one crying and the other nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. (One has to wonder if the latter picture was posed!)

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Such biases and the fear of deportation further complicated the situation during the 1930s.

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"St. Paul's increasing Mexican colony, living contentedly in poverty, is due for a drastic upheaval shortly," a second article stated. "Minnesota officials, prodded by Gov. (Elmer) Benson, have decided to rid the city of all those who are on relief . . . several hundred families, totalling more than 1,500 men, women and children. State Relief Administrator L.P. Zimmerman already has reached a tentative agreement with Antonio Schmidt, Mexican consul at Chicago, for their deportation—believed to be the first ever negotiated by an individual state without the cooperation of the federal government." Fortunately, this second deportation didn't occur.

The *Daily News* article is hardly the only evidence of prejudice against the struggling community. It also seems that a lingering and false stereotype about the Mexican and Mexican-American community was spawned during those difficult times—a stereotype that took years to erase. A 1951 *Pioneer Press* account claimed that the West Side's Mexican and Mexican-American community was "fathered by the depression." Many lifelong community residents rightfully disagree. Although the community grew rapidly during those years as outstate residents moved to St. Paul, it can be argued just as easily that the community was born because laborers were originally recruited for work in Minnesota more than a decade earlier.

Such biases and the fear of deportation further complicated the situation during the 1930s. Some families endured extreme hardship, unwilling to seek badly needed relief until it was absolutely necessary. Social services and community-based agencies were concerned about the residents' plight; the International Institute considered racial prejudice and lack of education to be the two outstanding problems faced by the Mexican community during this period.

By 1936, one report indicated, 1,152 of 1,500 Mexican-Americans, including more than 950 on the Lower West Side, were on relief. The fact that some neighborhood residents were ineligible for government programs was a further complication.

A 1936 report by Neighborhood House and the International Institute indicates that of 1,459 Mexicans and Mexican-Americans living in St. Paul, five were Europeans married to Mexicans; 496 were born in Mexico; and 834 were born in the United States. Almost all of them had been in the United States for more than five years, with many having spent more than ten years in this country. Many had been in Minnesota before the 1930s, but moved to St. Paul between 1931 and 1935.

The 1930s were also a time when housing in the flats neighborhood deteriorated significantly. Most of the community's small frame houses were built closely together. Many were rental properties, leased out by Jewish families who had left their neighborhood earlier. In some areas, Bill Hoffman recalled, streets had been built up to the point that the houses were ten to fifteen feet below the street. Going to the front door meant going down a small flight of steps.

A 1934 study by the Council of Social Agencies indicates that the neighborhood had the highest proportion of homes in need of major repair in the city. About 75 percent of the homes were of pre-1900 construction. Many were deemed unfit for human occupation, although families still lived in them. Even some habitable homes lacked electricity, indoor plumbing or gas. The 1938 Neighborhood House report states that "As early as 1933 a survey made

by the University of Minnesota showed this area to be the largest slum area in the Twin Cities." By the 1940s, there was concern that the condition of the housing there contributed to health problems in the community.

Coping with the Great Depression was a challenge for a community with relatively few material resources. The Neighborhood House staff, and the staff as well as members of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish had their hands full, but did their best to improve the lives of neighborhood residents. What kept the community together in the 1930s was a spirit of cooperation, bolstered by strong family units and community institutions. Our Lady of Gaudalupe was an especially important focal point, sponsoring sports teams (a 1942 boys' basketball squad was the first Mexican-American group ever to win a city championship in the "cadet" league) and the city's first all-Mexican Boy Scout troop in 1938. One of the most positive influences on the Lower West Side Mexican community, Our Lady of Guadalupe and its programs remain a vital influence in the neighborhood and the Twin Cities community today.

Our Lady of Guadalupe was founded as a Catholic mission to the community in 1931 on Fairfield Avenue. A few historical accounts indicate that the church shared a building with a tavern for its first few years of existence. The tavern eventually was purchased for more needed church space. Aid from the Guild of Catholic Women helped get the church started and community support has kept it going.

The church's active support of community members' religious beliefs and its willingness to honor Mexican holy days and holidays is in contrast to other ethnically-based parishes in St. Paul in an earlier era. In those days, strict adherence to "American" ways would have predominated, much to the detriment of those seeking to preserve traditional ways.

Yet another community institution that lent a helping hand to those in need was the Anahuac Society, or *Sociedad Mutua Beneficia Recreativa Anahuac*. Founded in 1922, this group was much like the benevolent mutual aid societies that helped earlier immigrants through difficult times. The Society helped families meet the expenses of food and medical care.

While the Lower West Side faced challenges in those terrible years, the neighborhood should not be judged by the poverty of the times. Longtime residents will maintain that the Lower West Side was a good neighborhood, a good place to live. Statistics indicate that crime rates in the area were relatively low and past residents declare that they never had to lock their doors.

People retained their dignity, even through the most trying circumstances. One story, told by the beloved Father James Ward of Our Lady of Guadalupe, notes that one Sunday in 1942 he offered free clothing to all who needed it. Parishioners were welcome to stop after 1 p.m. Monday. No one showed up at the appointed time. "I passed out all the clothing after dark," he said. "The people were too proud to have their neighbors think they were in need of charity."

The overwhelming comment of residents, preserved in interviews by the Minnesota Historical Society and the West Side Historical Society's Flood of History project, is that the Lower West Side was a happy place even in the clutch of hard times. The sentiments, whether spoken by Mexican-Americans, Jews, Germans or Irish, often echo one another. Sports, church, clubs, classmates and families were all important, as was Neighborhood House.

Although the children were of different backgrounds, they played together. One of the favorite places to play, much to their parents' dismay, was the old city dump. All kinds of treasures could be found there and it always was exciting when the refuse would ignite and burn, sending fire trucks racing along the neighborhood streets.

There were, however, misconceptions about the neighborhood, and among the ethnic groups living there. Pierce's thesis and some old Neighborhood House and International Institute studies indicate that contrasts in cultures on the West Side occasionally caused minor misunderstandings. Customs, traditions and even family values held dear by one group were sometimes a focus of curiosity for others. One early stereotype of the Mexican and Mexican-American community focused on the value of education. Because migrant families moved around to follow their livelihood, those who did strive to send their children to classes switched schools frequently.

Pierce's study showed that in the 1940s, more and more West Side Mexican and Mexican-American children began attending public and private schools. A few dozen even crossed the Mississippi to attend Assumption Church's parochial classrooms. By 1946, 468 children in the community were attending public schools.

The need for education turns up repeatedly in preserved interviews and articles. Gregorio Gonzales was singled out in a *Pioneer Press* account published in the early 1950s. The thirty-one-year-old neighborhood resident had quit his packing house job and was attending Macalester College.

"We lack education," he said. "Once the Mexicans see the light, they can make as much progress as anyone else." He added that parental influence, in seeing that children are educated, is the important thing. By the time Gonzales was a Macalester student, he was part of a community that was enjoying better times. In fact, population growth outstripped available housing by 1951.

The 1940s and 1950s were years of growing prosperity and contentment on the Lower West Side. The overall population grew, too, with one count finding 3,100 Mexican-Americans living in St. Paul in 1946. The labor shortages of World War II reopened employment opportunities that previously had been closed. Recruiting of laborers from the Southwest began again, bringing newcomers to St. Paul's Mexican colony. Jobs were more plentiful, both in the fields and the city but the move was on for more neighborhood residents to hold permanent, year-round jobs.

Alien registration also came to the West Side in 1941, an effort championed by Neighborhood House, Our Lady of Guadalupe and the International Institute. Mexicans who could prove their arrival in the United States before July 1, 1924, and continued residence since then could legalize their status as United States citizens. Mexican spouses of United States citizens and their children could petition Congress on hardship grounds and also seek citizenship.

The 1940s also were marked by the emergence of new community leaders who had been through the deprivation and discrimination of earlier times. One of the best-loved West Side advocates was Nick Castillo, Sr. In his younger days in Texas, he had experienced that state's version of racial apartheid – literally and figuratively shunted to the end of the line for jobs and opportunities. There was still discrimination in Minnesota when the family arrived.

"In the early 1920s, it was hard – two cultures clashing," said Nick Castillo, Jr., of his father's younger days. "They couldn't speak the language in school and were picked on. You could be bitter or fight it. He came to learn to be equal."

After service in World War II, Nick, Sr., came back to St. Paul and married a young Mexican-American woman from Hampton, Iowa. For Tomasa Perez,, whose family was one of the few permanent Mexican-American families in that region, coming to St. Paul to a large Mexican community was a change. When Tomasa Perez Castillo and Nick Castillo Sr., moved into their home in 1945, they lived in an area that was still diverse. Of her Jewish neighbors, Tomasa notes, "They used to go to church on Saturdays, and we'd go on Sundays . . . prejudice wasn't heard of."

Nick Castillo, who would win fame as a musician and balladeer, was the father of one of St. Paul's first Mexican bands, *Los Rumbaleros*. "My husband just wanted to play," said Tomasa. "He didn't care if he got paid. His music came from his heart." The community where the Castillos raised six children was a place where that culture was faithfully preserved by people like the Castillos and others. But it was also a place where children were encouraged to succeed. Castillo became an outspoken activist in the 1960s, joining with younger people to call for social change and joining the ranks of the activist Brown Berets, as its oldest member. The Brown Berets were an activist group for young Chicano men, ages 18–25. The Minnesota chapter began in the late 1960s. One of its major efforts was to start Chicano studies at the University of Minnesota. The members also were involved in a variety of community-based efforts, seeking educational, legal, anti-drug abuse and employment opportunities for their people. Like other activists of that time, the Brown Berets were sometimes regarded with suspicion by the police and even fellow Mexican-Americans.

The family of Thomasa Perez Castillo, one of the first Mexican-American families in northeastern Iowa. Thomasa is the little girl in the middle. Below: Thomasa with her husband, Nick Castillo, Sr.

"He was the forerunner of self-determination, perpetuated by music," said longtime West Sider and Castillo family friend Gilbert De Lao. "One of his thrusts was education. There wasn't much in our books or history that showed our culture in the development of America. It was all white history."

"He always said there was no future in the packing houses," said Nick, Jr. "The only way we were going to get something was to get an education." His father saw the

changes ahead, he added. "He said, 'Get educated because the packing houses and the railroads won't be here no more'. And they aren't."

Castillo, however, did not neglect his roots and culture. He called for strict observance of Mexico's independence from Spain, the *El Grito* festival. He helped organize parades on September 16. (Local festivals were sometimes moved to weekends.) Newspaper accounts of Mexican holidays observed on the West Side during the 1940s and 1950s indicate that the fall event attracted considerable media attention. Most of today's St. Paul residents would say *"Cinco de Mayo"* when asked to name an important Mexican holiday. That event commemorates Mexico's efforts to thwart French rule in the 1860s. But equally important is *El Grito de Dolores* ("The Cry") on September 16, the anniversary of Mexico's independence from Spain in 1810, after more than 300 years of Spanish rule.

The celebrations dated from the Mexican colony's early days in St. Paul. "The great holiday in St. Paul's Mexican community is on the fifteenth and sixteenth of September, when the men, women and children of the colony turn out in their new finery to commemorate the independence of Mexico," wrote Alice Sickels in her book, *Around the World in St. Paul*. "For two days Harriet Island in the Mississippi witnesses a gay mixture of an American Fourth of July celebration and a Mexican fiesta."

Neighborhood House and Our Lady of Gaudalupe were hosts at other events. The festival was finally made an annual event, with the nineteenth festival marked in 1959. *El Grito,* usually referred to simply as "Mexican Independence Day," has been revived as a publicly celebrated fete in recent years by West Side residents, including Gilbert de Lao, a Neighborhood House worker and community organizer.

As the 1950s ended, the West Side's Mexican-American community was moving ahead. The economic lot of many families had improved. The community's young people were starting to make their presence felt at Humboldt High School, and facing the pressures of retaining their heritage while fitting in with Anglo society.

Not surprisingly, the decade ended with a renewed emphasis on preserving and sharing Mexican culture. Two of the more visible new cultural institutions were the Ballet Folklorico, founded by Maria Rangel Moran, and The League of United Latin American Citizens. A group dedicated to promoting Latin American pride as well as defending human rights, the League started a local chapter with active West Side participation. And the Anahuac Society merged with *Comite Patriotico*.

Alas, a familiar nemesis that had threatened the community throughout the years returned in the 1950s. The floods of 1951 and especially 1952 are remembered as the worst. Tomasa Castillo recalls her husband warning her that the water was coming up. "But I didn't know what that meant," she said. She and the children learned that morning. The children, who were not yet dressed, were watching their mother frost a cake in the kitchen. Suddenly, all were startled by a loud bang coming from the basement.

Floodwaters were rapidly filling the basement. The family hurried to the home of Nick's parents, eventually wearing donated clothing and staying at a Red Cross shelter. A newspaper photograph captured the dejection on most of the family members' faces, although Nick, Jr., managed a broad smile. By 10 o'clock that same night, with the help of Neighborhood House, the Castillos were reunited.

The 1952 flood damaged hundreds of homes, many of them on the West Side. When the Castillos were able to return home, little was left on the first floor. Water had reached the ceilings, and the family's furniture and other belongings were washed out of a picture window. Huge fish were swimming in the still-flooded basement. Not surprisingly, when volunteers later were sought to build a retaining wall, Nick, Sr., was one of the first to step forward.

After another, less serious flood in 1957, city officials began to look at long-term solutions for the Lower West Side. It was finally decided that a massive new floodwall should be built, and that the small homes, stores, schools, churches and other buildings should be removed to make way for a new industrial park. Despite staunch opposition and community organizing efforts, the families were forced to relocate. Tomasa Castillo recalls sadly that her family, like others, had just finished paying for their home.

The new Riverview Industrial Park had a price tag of more than $9 million. Those forced to relocate were to share in a $4 million fund, but few felt they ever were adequately compensated for the loss of homes and business buildings. Some small businesses closed, rather than relocate. Some families moved away, because finding homes near the old neighborhood was difficult.

Several of today's West Side residents recall that displaced neighborhood residents were promised jobs at the new factories that were to open, but the jobs never came. By 1964, the old neighborhood was gone. While leveling a community seems unthinkable to many of us today, the destruction of the Lower West Side neighborhood to make way for Riverview Industrial Park occurred at a time when popular social betterment theory included the tenets of "urban renewal."

Urban renewal and interstate highway construction were increasingly involved in eradicating neighborhoods that were occupied by low-income people and people of color. The Lower West Side was not unique. Many people lost homes near downtown St. Paul during construction of the Capitol Approach. Others lost homes in other parts of downtown when rooming houses were leveled. The old Upper Levee neighborhood below the east end of the High Bridge was cleared for industrial development and flood protection, obliterating much of an established Italian neighborhood.

Like other close-knit neighborhoods in the Twin Cities, much of the Lower West Side was torn away and it was a major turning point in the lives of residents of the Mexican community. Little did they know that the struggles and the triumphs of the modern era lay ahead.

This is Jane McClure's second article for Ramsey County History. *She is a freelance reporter and feature writer for neighborhood newspapers in St. Paul.*

The public baths, beaches and bathers at Harriet Island. Views of St. Paul's parks, as well as the city's vibrant downtown, were popular with postcard publishers, Robert J. Stumm observes in his article beginning on page 18.

R.C.H.S.
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