

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*A Different
Sesquicentennial*

Remembering Fredrick McGhee

Paul D. Nelson

—page 13

Fall 2011

Volume 46, Number 3

Gone But Not Forgotten?

The Survival of Outdoor Sculpture in St. Paul

Moira F. Harris, page 3



In 1958 Sculptor Robert Johnson crafted a golden eagle as a corporate symbol for Minnesota Federal Savings and Loan. The eagle and rock weighed 1,100 pounds, stood eighteen feet tall, and the eagle had a twenty-three-foot wingspan. After the savings and loan merged with another financial institution, the eagle took flight in mid-1986 to the campus of Northwestern College in Roseville, where it was installed near the school's entrance gates. Eagle photos at Minnesota Federal by Jay Pfaender; at Northwestern College by Moira F. Harris.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 46, Number 3

Fall 2011

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Public art, like all reflections of popular sensibility, has changed over the years in Ramsey County. Molly Harris looks back at the evolution of our outdoor art, from zinc and cast-iron fountains and war heroes, to the Germania and eagle figures that graced insurance-company buildings, down to the colorful sculptures of Charles Schulz *Peanuts* characters. Leila Albert recounts the history of St. Paul's West Side, where people of Mexican descent were drawn by work opportunities and stayed to raise their families. Albert's accompanying book review essay and a current Landmark Center exhibit also highlight this community's struggles and achievements. Doug Heidenreich shares evocative memories of growing up in the West End neighborhood, where vacant lots acted as playing fields, and the coming of spring brought hollyhocks, rhubarb, and the trash man hauling away ashes produced by winter's coal-burning furnaces. And Paul Nelson notes the sesquicentennial of the birth of Fredrick McGhee, a pioneering African American criminal defense attorney and civil rights leader. As you settle down for a good read, don't forget that a membership makes a great holiday gift for anyone with personal Ramsey County memories.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Living la Vida en Ramsey County:

A Journey through Ramsey County's Mexican Past

Leila Renee Albert

On September 22, the Ramsey County Historical Society opened an exhibit in its gallery space in the Landmark Center focused on Ramsey County's Mexican past titled Living la Vida en Ramsey County. The curator of the exhibit is Leila Renee Albert with assistance from Jose Anaya and Mollie Spillman, RCHS curator-archivist. In addition to the various exhibits, the gallery includes a map of St. Paul's West Side that highlights a walking tour of the District del Sol and its colorful and varied works of art that express the neighborhood's Mexican culture and heritage. The exhibit is free and open to the public. Historian Leila Albert will also host several talks on Ramsey County's Mexican-American community in Landmark Center. Please check www.rchs.com for the dates and times. These talks are also free and open to the public.

Traveling through neighborhoods like District del Sol on St. Paul's West Side one is easily taken in by sights, smells, and sounds reminiscent of Mexico right here in Ramsey County. There is a vivid mixture of artwork reflective of Mexican heritage. Aromas of traditional Mexican dishes linger from restaurants and bakeries. Mexican goods and products are for sale at local markets. Spanish-language advertisements and periodicals are abundant. Spanish songs and conversations echo in the parks and along the streets. Community events celebrate Mexican heroes and holidays. Ramsey County offers many a means by which one may experience the essence of Mexico, which begs the question of how there came to be so much Mexican heritage so far north from Mexico.

Demographics

To begin, one may note the increasing growth of the Mexican-descended population, not only locally, but nationwide as well. Simply assuming that all Latinos are of Mexican descent is, however, wrong. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the total population of Ramsey County was 511,202 persons with 5% or 26,979 of the population having been "Hispanic or Latino" persons. Of the Hispanic and/or

Latino population, 71% or 19,159 persons were of Mexican descent.¹ Most assuredly, these figures have increased over the past decade and are significantly higher today. Simply put, Mexican-Americans comprise the bulk, the most visible, and the best documented portion of the Latino population in Minnesota, the Twin Cities Metro area, and within Ramsey County.

Terminology

Then, there is a degree of confusion simply in terms of terminology; Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican, and Mexican-American. What do these words mean? What do they imply? And, which should one use? Simply put, Latino means a person with ancestral and/or ethnic ties to Latin America, which is comprised of Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. This term is all inclusive, generally appropriate, and widely accepted.

Mexican can be understood as a person with birth and/or political ties to Mexico. Mexican-Americans are Americans with ancestral and/or ethnic ties to Mexico. Hispanic and Chicano have varied meanings and understandings and should therefore be used with caution and care.

Hispanic is a bit more confusing because it may be used when referring to a person of Spanish descent, or a per-



Morgan's Market mural celebrates the West Side's Aztec heritage. Photo courtesy of Leila Renee Albert.

son with ancestral ties to Hispania (the Iberian Peninsula comprised of Spain and Portugal), or a person from Spanish America (Mexico and the Spanish-speaking countries from Central and South America and the Caribbean). Confusion regarding the term Hispanic also comes from usage.

The U.S. Census has used Hispanic to refer to all persons of Spanish descent and all persons from Spanish America. Additionally, the term Hispanic can and has been used to refer to those people who lived in the area that the United States gained from Mexico following the war between the two countries, roughly the states of New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, California, Texas, and Florida. Hispanic was not inclusive of or to people from Spanish America who did not have ancestral ties to Hispania and/or identified more so with their indigenous heritage. The term Hispanic also came to include a more derogatory usage and meaning among certain populations within the United States.

Chicano came into popular usage as identification of and by Mexican-Americans after the 1950s and mostly during and following the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, which sought for rights and recognition of persons of Mexican descent. Chicano can refer to any person from Mexico or of Mexican descent. The term, however, is largely understood as a U.S. citizen with Mexican descent.

Getting Back to the Past

Mexican-Americans have the best documented history of Latinos in Minnesota and Ramsey County. Mexicans were brought to Minnesota and Ramsey County by the railroad and stockyards as well as the sugar-beet and meat-packing industries. St. Paul became one of the primary places where Mexicans settled, eventually forming the neighborhood of District del Sol, because of the proximity to and availability of employment and social opportunities. Indeed, Ramsey County Mexican-Americans increasingly have come to comprise a flourishing part of Ramsey County heritage.

The Mexican community of Ramsey County has a colorful presence and history in neighborhoods throughout the



This chapel in Swede Hollow, St. Paul, was created from a railroad boxcar. Seen here in about 1949, it served the Mexican-American community on the East Side for many years. St. Paul Dispatch photo. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

county. Their story began in 1886 with Luiz Garzón, an oboist from Mexico City, who travelled to the area to perform with an orchestra in Minneapolis. Mr. Garzón became ill and stayed behind while the orchestra continued on its tour. After he got well, Garzón chose to stay in the area, and eventually he opened a grocery store in St. Paul's West Side Flats. Slowly the Mexican community began to grow during the first decades of the twentieth century.² Again, the question arises why a Mexican community developed on St. Paul's West Side. This narrative and the associated exhibition and programming, hosted by Ramsey County Historical Society, sought to answer that question.

Some Background

Growth of the Mexican population was the result of the passing of the Dingley Act in 1897 which raised tariffs on imported goods, one of which was sugar. The Dingley Act coincided with and contributed to the rapid growth of the sugar beet industry in Minnesota and elsewhere in the Great Plains of the United States. As the sugar beet industry grew, so too did a call for laborers. With a diminishing labor supply caused by anti-immigration laws enacted during the early 1900s to re-

strict immigration from Europe and Asia, representatives of sugar beet companies recruited migrant workers from the Southwestern United States and Mexico.³

Although sugar beet work was seasonal, year-round residency proved to be more beneficial. As workers began to stay year round, they likewise began relocating to areas that provided improved living conditions and additional employment opportunities. Seasonal workers (also known as migrant workers) found employment opportunities mostly in the stockyards, meatpacking plants, and with the railroad. Living situations improved from makeshift camps and boxcars to houses in neighborhoods that families came to call home. They settled in neighborhoods situated near places of employment such as St. Paul's West and East Sides; repeating the patterns of earlier European newcomers. The largest settlement was, and largely still is, located on St. Paul's West Side.

Pushes from Mexico

Other factors contributing to the steady growth of Mexicans in Ramsey County were social and economic upheavals in Mexico. For example, the Mexican Revolution forced many Mexicans from their homes after years of increasing



When this photo was taken in 1951, Our Lady of Guadalupe was located at 186 East Fairfield Avenue, St. Paul. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

discontent and warfare ravished families throughout Mexico. Subsequent periods of political, societal, and economic downturns also pushed many Mexicans to answer calls for labor from the United States. In 1917 Mexico drafted and enacted a new constitution with anticlerical provisions and laws resulting in the Cristero Rebellion which added to the disruption that the Revolution brought to many lives during the 1920s and pushed some families from their homes.⁴ Many whose lives had been impacted by years of upheaval migrated to the north escaping ongoing hardships while simultaneously answering calls to work as well as calming the cries of their families.

Discrimination and Repatriation

The wave of Mexicans coming to the United States during the first two decades of the twentieth century soon faced economic hardships and societal disturbances that they had hoped to have left behind in Mexico. Especially during the years of the Great Depression, increasing conflicts with Anglos and competition for jobs often resulted in prejudicial acts and discriminatory policies practiced against persons of Mexican descent.

The repatriation program of the 1930s is one example of such prejudice. This joint effort between the United States and Mexico sought to rectify the so-called Mexican problem by removing any and all persons who appeared Mexican, regardless of their citizenship. In St. Paul, public officials coerced roughly 15 percent of the Mexican population to leave their homes and board a train headed south to Mexico in November of 1932.⁵ Needless to say, such policies were acts of crude discrimination that accomplished little. In most cases, they only succeeded in ripping people from their homes and tearing families apart.

War and More

Despite ongoing prejudice and discrimination, men of Mexican descent were a proud group who joined in the call to serve the United States in the armed forces no more than a decade after the initiation of the repatriation program. During World War II, many young men aided in the war effort by enlisting to serve in active duty overseas while women helped on the home front by filling labor positions vacated by servicemen fighting abroad. World War II alone

saw well over 600 men of Mexican descent enlist in the Armed Forces.⁶

By the end of the war, the Mexican community was becoming well established and residents of Mexican descent sought to solidify their presence in Ramsey County. Social clubs provided a means of support and assistance. The Anahuac Society, founded in 1922, helped to instill a sense of pride and solidarity within the Mexican community by hosting traditional activities and events.⁷ Later, the American GI Forum was created during the 1940s to support local veterans. Such social groups also functioned to give voice to and present a positive portrayal of a growing local community of Mexican descent that was long overlooked, ignored, and even ostracized by mainstream society.

Finding Home

Areas where Mexicans settled were viewed by many as undesirable. Mexicans came to call these places home and created familial and community ties within them. As was mentioned previously, one such place was on the Flats of St. Paul's West Side. Because the area was prone to frequent flooding, it was likewise one of the most affordable areas to reside within Ramsey County. The Flats had served as home for many groups of newcomers from Italians to Jews and finally, Mexicans.

The Mexicans who settled on the Flats worked to create a thriving community for their families and neighbors. In 1931 the Guild of Catholic Women, the Archdiocese of St. Paul, and area Mexican families worked together to create the first Mexican mission in Ramsey County and Minnesota. The mission first was located in a storefront on Wabasha Street and next in a pool hall on Fairfield Avenue. The new mission, which later became Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe) Parish, was furnished with donated items from area families and churches.⁸

The Flats also was home to Neighborhood House where newcomers to the area, like Mexicans, could attend community education courses designed to prepare them for life in the United States



Neighborhood House, 179 East Robie Avenue, St. Paul, in 1924. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

while also maintaining their ethnic identity.⁹ Neighborhood house likewise offered a place for the growing Mexican community to gather for social events, such as dances, Mexican Independence Day celebrations, or Cinco de Mayo fiestas.

Recreating Community

After having created a community in the Flats neighborhood for half a century, local officials deemed the area unsafe and unlivable and initiated a forced relocation of all persons residing there. Residents were compensated according to determined market value of their property; however the determined value was nowhere near enough to purchase property in other areas.¹⁰ Furthermore, many Westsiders had no desire to relocate out of the neighborhood they came to know, love, and call home. Eventually though, they all moved away from the Flats and the neighborhood was razed and redeveloped as the industrial park that is situated there today.

Of course this was not the end of the Mexican community. Those who were displaced relocated and began rebuilding their community, the majority of which has since become the neighborhood of and those surrounding District del Sol located on St. Paul's West Side. Other Mexican communities also took shape on St. Paul's East Side, in the area of Frogtown and Summit Avenue, and elsewhere throughout Ramsey County, the Twin Cities, and greater Minnesota.¹¹

Solidification

Despite having been forced from their homes, first from Mexico, then repatriation, and again from forced removal following the flood of 1952, Ramsey County's Mexican community is here to stay. Many families relocated a little further up from the river and began to rebuild and solidify their presence. Our Lady of Guadalupe built a new church in 1961 complete with chapel, cafeteria, and classrooms.¹² Soon thereafter, Guillermo & Gloria Frias opened Boca Chica Restaurant a short distance down the road.

To increase housing opportunities and availability on the West Side, Mexican residents established two housing cooperatives, Torre de San Miguel and Rio Vista. While the 1970s saw the Brown Berets fighting for rights from St. Paul's West Side and the opening of El Burrito Mercado by Tomas and Maria Silva, the 1980s gave rise to the founding of Riverview Economic Development Association and the organization of District del Sol to promote the West Side as a prosperous and flourishing neighborhood.

Recognition and Representation

In recent decades the Mexican community of Ramsey County has received increasing recognition for its efforts and achieve-

ments. Minnesota Historical Society undertook the Mexican-American History Project from 1975 to 1977 with Ramedo Saucedo as the director of the project. This project documented the stories of many of Ramsey County's earliest Mexican residents and made available an invaluable and abundant source of materials for the public to learn of Minnesota's Mexican-American history.

In the early 1990s Ramsey County Historical Society's history magazine (*Ramsey County History*) featured an article focused on Mexican-American history in the state and county. Around the same time, the Minnesota Historical Society published "Voices of La Raza in Minnesota" an entire issue of *Roots* magazine that focused entirely on Mexican-American history in Minnesota. This and the coming decade saw the publication of many more articles and books written to recognize and represent Minnesota and Ramsey County Mexicans while also further increasing and enhancing the knowledge and understandings of Mexican Minnesota.

The Journey

This narrative and its correlating exhibition and programming conveys why a Mexican community was created on St. Paul's West Side and likewise how there came to be so much Mexican heri-



The West Side of St. Paul along the Mississippi River, including the Flats (bottom), during the March 1952 flood. St. Paul Dispatch photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Torre de San Miguel (Tower of St. Michael) today. Photo courtesy of Leila Renee Albert.

tage so far north of Mexico. Like the majority of Americans, most Mexicans originated elsewhere. They made their way first from Mexico, into and across the United States, and then into and across Minnesota.

Throughout the United States, in factories and on farms, the number of workers has often been lacking. During times of such labor shortages, Mexicans have been recruited as a readily available, affordable, and reliable source of labor throughout the United States, Minnesota, and Ramsey County. One may now recall that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were drawn to the area as workers in agriculture and industry, many in the sugar

beet fields in the Minnesota and Red River Valley areas of the state.

Mexican and Mexican-American workers increasingly settled in Minnesota and Ramsey County as demand grew for workers during the first decades of the twentieth century. Initially these workers were migratory, seasonal, or temporary. The sugar beet industry provided between seven and eight months of employment. Over time, both employers and employees found permanent residency far more favorable. Increasingly, workers sought year-round employment and residency in areas that offered improved working and living conditions. Eventually workers secured year-round homes in areas that offered year-round employment where they have since been raising families and creating communities like those of Ramsey County today.

El Fin

The Mexican community of Ramsey County arrived to work in the fields and in the factories; they came to this place and came to call this place home. In so doing, they created a community rich in values and traditions, history, and culture. Ramsey County residents of Mexican descent have solidified their presence in neighborhoods like District del Sol where one can experience firsthand the essence of Mexican culture and history through markets, parks, fiestas, restaurants, and vibrant displays of artistic expression.

The Mexican community in Ramsey County has experienced its share of trials and tribulations, efforts and achievements from arrival and settlement, through repatriation and relocation, and not only to community building and communal



Canto Al Pueblo mosaic by Pablo and Mary Basques, Greta McLain, and Kris Raff. Photo courtesy Leila Renee Albert.

organization, but also to recognition and representation. Over the course of the twentieth century and into the new century, the Mexican-American population of Ramsey County has created a thriving community proud of its accomplishments and heritage.

Leila Renee Albert is a historian with expertise in Mexican-American history. She earned her M.A. from the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire in 2008. Additionally, she worked with the Chippewa Valley Museum to document the arrival of Latinos to the Chippewa Valley and is now developing an exhibition and programming focused on the Mexican-Americans of Ramsey County.

Endnotes

1. United States Census Bureau, *American FactFinder*, United States Department of Commerce, <http://factfinder.census.gov>.
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3. Juan R. García, *Mexicans in the Midwest,*

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4. Jim Norris, *North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009), 27–28.
5. Valdés, 97; Roethke, 40–41.
6. Roethke, 54.
7. *Ibid.*, 32–34.

8. Dionisa C. Coates, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A 75 Year History of the First Mexican Catholic Church in Minnesota*, (St. Paul: Sexton Printing, Inc., 2009), 7–8, 13–14.
9. Roethke, 34–35.
10. Valdés, 173–76.
11. Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research, <http://www.hacer-mn.org>, HACER.
12. Coates, 44–47.

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Torre de San Miguel (Tower of St. Michael) is a major landmark on St. Paul's West Side and a powerful emblem for Minnesota's first urban barrio. For more on the history of Mexican-Americans in this neighborhood and Minnesota, see page 20. Photo by Lelia R. Albert.