

150 Years of Latino Contributions in Oregon

Oregon State Hispanic Employees Network

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It is an honor and a pleasure to be here with you today to celebrate the accomplishments of so many other Latinos who settled in Oregon before us, contributing to make of this land such an especial place to live and raise a family. If those early settlers were here today, they would tell us that the cultural and political landscapes of our state are quite different from the way they were fifty years ago.

Today, the Mexican and generally Latin American presence is well established throughout the state. *Supermercados, panaderias, and tortillerias* can be found wherever there is a population of Mexican descent. Mexican restaurants and *taquerias* attract mainstream Oregonians almost everywhere. Latino influence is evident in cultural celebrations like Fiestas Latinas and Fiestas Mexicanas (Portland and Guadalajara are Sister Cities since the mid-1980s). Latino themed murals are found in many cities. Latino artists are featured in art galleries in Portland. Latino music, dance, and theater groups perform around the state.

Spanish language and bilingual communication media have proliferated. Seven radio stations broadcast full time in Spanish in the Willamette Valley (between Portland and Eugene), among them La Pantera in Salem, La Voz del Pueblo, PCUN's own radio station in Woodburn, La X in Portland and Eugene, and two other radio stations in Southern Oregon.

Latino soccer leagues and other sports teams (such as basketball and even golf) have multiplied with the growth and diversification of the population. A number of towns have Mexican-style rodeos with the participation of *charros* and mariachis.

Latinos have made and will continue to make significant contributions to the state. They are starting new businesses, are joining the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, are getting law degrees, becoming state employees, entering local politics as elected officials (a number of County and City Commissioners are Latino), and are getting appointed to the judicial system. Overall they facilitate the fair treatment of Latino residents and also help these residents to become aware of the rights and obligations that come with a sense of belonging to this beautiful land.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the transcontinental railroad and irrigation projects made it possible the development of commercial agricultural production in the Northwest. The fertile Willamette Valley, the Columbia river Basin, and the plains of eastern Oregon were able to produce a rich abundance of specialty crops (fruits, vegetables, nuts, berries, grapes, sugar beets, onions, hops, wheat, and many other crops) that required an intensive—usually seasonal—labor supply in regions that were often sparsely populated. The need for labor led Oregon growers to recruit Mexican laborers away from the Southwest and from Mexico to work on area farms.

By 1924, Mexicans were contracted from the southwestern states to work in sugar beets at three dollars per day, and Portland was a significant recruiting ground for Mexican workers. Sugar beet farmers led the way in the northwest in contracting Mexican laborers

under the Mexican Farm Labor Program or *Bracero* program. This program was designed to recruit Mexican laborers to replace those who either entered the U.S. armed forces or who left farm labor to work in industry. The Bracero program existed in the state of Oregon from 1942-1947. Approximately 15,000 braceros were contracted as farm laborers.

After the program concluded, Northwest growers found a new source of labor— Mexican-American migratory laborers recruited from Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and other areas of the Southwest. Some of the first Mexican-origin families settled permanently in Nyssa, Hood River, Woodburn, Independence, and St. Paul area in the 1950s. Many of these families came originally as farm workers, but began to settle and worked in local canneries, on the railroad, in construction and continued to carry out seasonal harvesting work.

In the 1960s Mexican and Mexican-American families were often able to purchase homes, and their children attended local public. A few settlers opened local businesses such as small stores or restaurants. Their children and grandchildren now speak English as a first language. Some of the *Tejano* migrants settled in Oregon towns and cities have become local civic activists and leaders who bridge different generations of Latino immigrants. Also farm workers from the state of Michoacán, and indigenous Oaxacans settled in Oregon. The 1970s brought other Latin American immigrants, primarily to the Portland metropolitan area.

Here in Salem, for example, historians say that only four Spanish-speaking families lived in the 1950s and 1960s. In the mid-1970s Angel Baez opened Los Baez restaurant. In the 1980s Juan Ceja started Forestry for the Future, a Tree Planting and Reforestation Company. Mexicans formed a close community around common language and traditions. Informal

networks provided help with loans, to pay lawyers' fees and hospital bills, and funerals. Raul Ramirez is still remembered as the first Hispanic to serve as Marion County Sheriff. In those years, Adan Morales formed the Grupo Oriundo, and collected money to make home improvements in their hometown of Santa Maria Tindu in Oaxaca.

For the period spanning from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, the Mexican immigrant population changed significantly since many of the men who became legal permanent residents through the 1986 Immigration and Reform Act (IRCA) and the accompanying Special Agricultural Workers Program (SAW) sent for their wives and children. Once their families arrived, they settled here permanently in communities like Hermiston, Boardman, Umatilla, Hood River, Salem, Woodburn, Northeast Portland, Gresham, Medford, and elsewhere. They came to form communities built around relatives and neighbors from the same place of origin.

The number of Latinos or "Hispanics" counted by the 1970 U.S. Census in Oregon was small, less than 2 percent of the population. In the 1980 U.S. Census, Latinos represented about 2.5 percent of the total population (65, 000 people). From 1990 to the year 2000, the Latino population in Oregon more than doubled to about 8 percent; today over 300,000 Latinos represent about 10 percent of the total population.

The growth of the Latino population has been sustained since the 1990s. The resultant demographic and cultural impacts in our state have been enormous. Now births to Hispanic mothers are 20 percent of the total births in Oregon; and the children of Latino families are very visible in the schools. Latinos are generally younger and less educated than people in other population groups—the median age of Latinos in Oregon is 22 years, compared to 38 years of

non-Latino whites. Many these young Latinos have families with children—who are more likely to live in low-income households. Recent immigrant workers find year-round employment in the agriculture and also in construction, manufacturing, and the service sector. Many are quite mobile within a very narrow band of occupations. Latino immigrant parents in Salem and elsewhere still struggle to master English, achieve success and carve out a place for themselves in society, retaining their ethnic identity—that it's very much defined by language and culture.

I would like to say a few words on multiculturalism. We sustain that maintenance of language and preservation of culture are not only constitutional rights for ethnic communities in democratic societies, but are also fundamentally necessary for an immigrant group to gain a foothold in the adopted country. Although immigrants would teach the language of the country of origin to the second generation, organize festivals, and carry on public performances inspired in their native cultures, in most cases language maintenance applies only in the first two or three generations, after which there is a rapid decline. The prevalence of cultural symbols, however, usually lasts much longer.

Members of the majority population may see cultural difference as a threat to the nation's identity. Immigrant languages and cultures may become expressions of otherness and markers for discrimination. In the view of some citizens, immigrants should give their languages and cultures up in order to assimilate. Failure to do so is regarded as an indication of desire to remain separated. The alternative view is that ethnic communities need their own languages and cultures to develop identity and self-esteem. Cultural maintenance helps communities to gain collective strength which would, in turn assist community members in

their integration to the larger society. Similarly bilingualism brings benefits in academic learning, social interaction, intellectual development, and ultimately mutual understanding, and strong sense of belonging.

In conclusion, let's review some important dates that punctuate the contributions of Latinos in Oregon during the past 150 years.

150 Years of Latino Contributions in Oregon: A Chronology¹

1850s: Mexican mule packers supplied the Second Regiment Oregon Mounted Volunteers during the Rogue River War who fought against Oregon's native peoples who were defending their territory.

1869: Mexican vaqueros brought up large herds of cattle driven from California to eastern Oregon.

1910-1925: Mexican workers are contracted to work in sugar beets, and on railroads in Portland, eastern Oregon and in other parts of the state. The first Mexican families settle permanently in the state.

1942-1947: More than 15,000 *bracero* workers come to the state to work in agriculture. Additional workers were employed on railroads.

1950s: *Mexicano* and Mexican-American *Tejano* families settled in a several areas of the state

1955: Portland Catholic Archdiocese establishes a Migrant Ministry to serve the Mexican migrant population. In 1964 the name changes to Oregon Friends of Migrants

1964: First Fiesta Mexicana held by the Mexican committee Pro Fiestas Mexicanas in Woodburn, Oregon

1964: The Valley Migrant is formed. It is later known as Oregon Rural Opportunities (ORO) and ends in 1979

1971: The Commission for Chicano Affairs is established. In 1983, the group was renamed the Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs.

¹ Source: Stephen, Lynn and Marcela Mendoza. 2008. Oregon. In Mark Overmyer-Velazquez (ed.) *Latino America, A State-by-State Encyclopedia*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, page 667-668.

1973: Colegio César Chávez, the first Latino four-year college in the U.S. is created on the former campus of Mt. Angel College in Silverton, Oregon. It closes in 1983.

1977: Willamette Valley Immigration Project opens in Portland then moves to Woodburn to protect and represent undocumented workers.

1979: Salud de la Familia Medical Clinic established in Woodburn, Oregon

1981: El Hispanic News begins publication

1985: Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN, Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United) forms as Oregon's only farmworker union.

1995: The Chicano/Latino Studies Program is established at Portland State University.

1996: CAUSA, Oregon Immigrant Rights Coalition is formed

2005: Latinos are registered by the U.S. Census as 9.9 percent of the state's population and Paul J. De Muniz is the first Latino Chief of Justice in the Oregon Supreme Court.