The Journey North

The first major wave of Mexican immigration to Chicago began in the 1910s. These early immigrants came mostly from the Central Mexican states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Jalisco, as well as Texas and farming communities in the Midwest. They came for various reasons; some were desperate for a job to support their families and had heard there was plenty of work in Chicago’s new factories and railroad yards, others were fleeing the political upheaval of the Mexican Revolution, while still others came to escape the religious persecutions of the Cristero War.

Most of these initial immigrants were solos—married men who temporarily left their families in Mexico or bachelors. In Chicago, they worked on the railroads, in steel factories, and in meatpacking houses.

The railroads were key for bringing Mexicans to Chicago. Not only were they a fast and direct form of mass transportation—many railroad companies sent recruiters or enganchistas to Mexico to contract workers to build and maintain new railroad lines. Mexicans helping build the railroad (traqueros) lived in portable boxcars along the tracks and moved northward as the rail lines extended. In Chicago, Mexican communities sprung up in the railroad camps of converted boxcars such as the South Chicago Rock Island Railroad Camp at 2650 East 95th Street. The people who lived in these ‘camp cars’ used kerosene lanterns for light and had no running water. Entire families lived in one car and would often take in solos as boarders.

Another path to Chicago was by way of farm work. Many Mexicans contracted by enganchistas went to rural areas of the Midwest first to work in sugar beet fields. Entire families migrated to Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Iowa to harvest beets together in the fields. These betabeleros (sugar beet workers) and other farmworkers moved with the seasons to harvest or plant crops at the busiest times of the year. Many decided to spend the winter working in factories in Chicago, instead of making the expensive trip back south. In the warmer months they might return to the beet fields, but a large number stayed in Chicago permanently.

Building Community

Mexicans arriving to Chicago usually found poorly maintained, crowded and expensive housing. They faced segregation and were often charged higher rent simply because they were Mexican. This worsened the overcrowding issue, since multiple families would be forced to share living quarters. Colonias or Mexican residential areas developed around work sites near steel mills, factories, railroad yards, and stockyards in the Calumet region, the Near West Side, and Back of the Yards.

Social life for the early solos arriving to Chicago centered around pool halls, barber shops, and settlement houses. When more women and children began to arrive, the colonias expanded and Mexicans established bodegas (markets), restaurants, tortilla factories, and local newspapers. They also founded mutualistas—business, labor, and social groups that helped their members in times of hardship.

Religious life for Mexican immigrants to Chicago centered mainly on Roman Catholicism. The South Chicago Mexican community successfully rallied for the first local Mexican church Our Lady of Guadalupe, built in 1924. In the late 1920s, Cordi Marian nuns fleeing the religious persecution of the Cristero War arrived in Chicago and worked with Mexicans in Packingtown, South Chicago, and the Near West Side. St. Francis of Assisi Church on Polk Street became a spiritual center for Mexicans living on the west side. Today, there are over 111 Roman Catholic churches in Chicago with enough Spanish-speaking parishioners to have masses in Spanish.

20th Century Crises

When the stock market crashed in 1929, the Great Depression struck the United States and caused widespread job loss. Mexican workers were often the first to be laid off. Resentment against them became so great that over one million Mexicans and “Mexican looking” individuals were rounded up and deported in the 1930s. ‘Mexican Repatriation,’ as it was called, cut Chicago’s Mexican population nearly in half.
Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Mexicans in Chicago fought for improved housing and education through groups like the Spanish Coalition for Jobs and the Latino Institute, also working to combat the employment and social discrimination still faced by many. Political and community activists advocated for institutions like Benito Juarez High School and established organizations such as Centro de la Causa, Casa Aztlán, Mujeres Latinas en Acción, Pilsen Neighbors, and Latino Youth.

**Mexican Chicago Today**

Today, the cycle of immigration is still being repeated, with new immigrants both official and undocumented continuing to arrive to Mexican communities throughout Chicago. New arrivals with limited skills and limited English usually enter jobs not unlike those available to immigrants in the early 1900s. Landscaping work has often replaced migrant farm work, and non-union factory work has replaced unionized jobs in steel and other heavy industries of early decades. The number of immigrants from urban areas has increased, and among them are more skilled workers, clerical workers, professionals, and businessmen.

The 2010 U.S. Census counted 778,862 Mexicans in Chicago and approximately 1 million Mexicans in the greater Chicagoland area. 44% of Chicago Public School students are of Latino origin, with children of Mexican descent making up 25% of all CPS students. The Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods are today’s fastest-growing areas of Mexican and, more recently, Central American settlement in Chicago.

Today, Mexicans hold prominent city government positions, positions within the Chicago Public School system, Aldermanic seats, state representative seats, and own many successful businesses. Chicago Mexicans are a socially active group involved in many protest marches and other civil demonstrations concerning a wide range of issues including immigration, education and housing concerns. Today, Chicago’s substantial Mexican community continues to grow, increase its presence in the life of the city, and expand its participation in all areas of society.

Sources:
Mexican Chicago by Ríta Arias Jirasek and Carlos Tortolero.
1. Pictured here is a Mexican railroad car sitting outside of the roundhouse in Orizaba, Veracruz, in 1937. All men depicted are railroad workers, similar to other railroad workers who made the journey via rail all the way to Chicago.

2. Pictured here in 1944, Calixto Arroyo is standing on one of the New York Central Railroad's biggest engines—the Streamlined Hudson. Calixto was first contracted as a bracero for the agricultural field of California after migrating from Tendeparacua, Michoacan. Later that year he was contracted by the New York Central Railroad to work in the round house. He lived in a boxcar facility in Cleveland, Ohio until 1945. Calixto eventually made his way to South Chicago, and later arranged for his family to emigrate in 1957.

3. Pictured are betabeleras, female sugar beet workers, including Frances Martinez, center, with cut sugar beets. This photograph, taken c. 1926, along with the certificate of merit issued by the Great Western Sugar Company, documents that entire families worked in fields much like the migrant families of today.

4. The Martinez children with friends are photographed here on a locomotive in McCook, Nebraska. The Martinez family arrived in Nebraska in 1916 from Aguascalientes, Mexico. Yance Martinez stated “I remember my parents telling me that they were loaded on trains. They didn’t even really know where they were going. They lived in railroad cars along side of the fields, I was born in one of those cars.”
8. Carmen Martínez, the two-year-old child named on the back of this document, traveled on her mother's papers. Although she never returned to Mexico to live permanently, she did not go through formal citizenship proceedings until 1957.

6. Phil Ocasta, a railroad worker pictured here c. 1925 in Nebraska, lived in camp cars alongside the sugar beet workers.

7. By 1923, when this receipt was issued, the head tax upon entry was $8. Earlier fees had been as little as 5¢. Stamps on the back of the document mark re-entries in 1925 and again in 1941.

9. The South Chicago Rock Island Railroad Camp photographed here was located at 2650 East 95th Street. The converted boxcars were called camp cars. Introduced in Chicago as early as 1917, railroad camps provided housing to many workers. Anita Jones, in her 1927 dissertation Conditions Surrounding Mexicans in Chicago, listed 22 different camps. The well-dressed men featured in this photograph worked for the railroad and lived in these cars with their families.

10. The three young women are posing in a field in front of a railroad car with the Rock Island logo. At one time there were as many as 15 camp cars on this site. "I remember visiting the box cars when I was a little girl," stated Carmen Arias, "I would help clean the kerosene lanterns that they used for light. There was no running water in the houses, and we used outhouses."
11. This First Communion portrait of Carmen López and her family was taken c. 1930. First Communions were important family events. Carmen, like most female communicants, is wearing an elaborate communion dress and veil. Young men usually wore suits. The outfits were made at home or purchased especially for the occasion. After the ceremony, family parties were hosted at home, where traditional Mexican foods were served. Formal studio photographs taken at that time were usually sent to loved ones in Mexico and other parts of the United States as a remembrance of the occasion.

12. The site for this 1955 Quinceañera was at Turner Hall Centro Social on Roosevelt Road.

13. The wedding portrait is of Jesús Mota and Jane Staley with his family in 1957. The Jesús Mota family, originally from Momax, Zacatecas, and Michoacán, moved from South Chicago to the west side and were parishioners at St. Charles Borromeo Church located at Hoyne and Roosevelt. The smiling little boy in dark shorts, Ray Mota, has grown up to become the head of Chicago’s leading Mexican construction company.

14. Grandmother Ruiz is shown here teaching her grandchildren about the intricacies of masa (corn dough)—the critical ingredient in making tamales. These family gatherings to make tamales are called tamaladas. Family recipes and tamale making techniques are taught at these gatherings. Families and friends all have assigned jobs: some mix meat and masa, others spread the masa on corn husks or add the fillings, while there is always someone in charge of stacking the finished products for steaming. Tamales are served at Christmas and other special occasions.

15. Pictured here in front of Providence of God Church are Jesús and Carmen Macías and their family at their 50th wedding anniversary in 1997. Mr. Macías first came to the United States at the age of 23 to work in agriculture as a bracero. As a bracero agricultural worker, he traveled to Colorado, California, Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota, Utah, Georgia, Illinois, Texas, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and New York. He returned to Ocampo, Guanajuato, to marry in 1947. He brought his family to Chicago in 1965.
16. Mariachi groups played at social gatherings, weddings, and christening parties. The traditional music was for singing and dancing. The vocalist shown here is performing on a stage in front of an American Legion logo. Traditional Mexican music continues to be an important cultural connection. The word mariachi is said to have come from the French word marriage, used during the time Maximilian and Carlota were in Mexico to describe musical groups who performed at weddings.

17. Pictured here is a celebration of the Fiestas Patrias, 15th and 16th of September holidays commemorating the 1810 Cry of Freedom, called in Spanish El Grito de Dolores. Here the celebration takes place in the old Grant Park Band Shell, or La Concha. The Concha was rented for $350 for the first grito, remembered Raul González, former member of the Circulo Jaliciense. A huge crowd showed up for the first parade and Grito. Former Mayor Daley appeared at the Bandshell and said, “I want to thank you for a wonderful parade.” He then proclaimed the week of September 15th “Mexican Week.”

18. This moving photograph was taken during a parents’ march and candle vigil against gang violence. The issue of gangs and their destructive presence haunts urban communities throughout the United States. Pictured here is Robertina Arellano holding a photograph of her son, Erik Arellano, who died as a result of gang violence during the summer of 1995. Unfortunately, much of the mainstream media never covers the positive accomplishments and attributes of young Mexican youth.

19. Jesse Muñoz, dressed in his graduation cap and gown, is shown here surrounded by his family after being presented with his Juris Doctorate from the University of Chicago in May of 1995.

20. This is the first Mexican parade held on State Street. Pictured here is “La Herradura,” a member of the Charro Association that was founded to continue the traditions of the Mexican charro, or gentleman cowboy. Most of the members of these associations owned their own horses. In addition to participating in parades, groups sponsored charreadas, or Mexican rodeos. At the time of this parade, former Mayor Daley was reluctant to close State Street for this event because that would mean losing $1 million in revenue. According to one of the parades founders, Raúl González, “Daley said, ‘Son, I’m going to give you half the Street.’ By the time the parade got to Madison we had taken up the whole Street from the river to Congress!”

21. Large Mexican parades always featured floats sponsored by service organizations such as this Azteca Lion float carrying a queen and her court captured here with Marina Towers in the background. Parades such as this one are still used to celebrate the Fiestas Patrias and Cinco de Mayo traditional holidays.
22. Pictured are soccer clubs El Atlas and La Porra in Douglas Park in 1966. Included in the photograph are Armando Almonte and well-known goalie Manuel Canchola.

23. Alberto García is carried off the field as Bowen High School wins its third consecutive City Soccer Championship. The 1981 City Champs were a predominantly Mexican team and one of the several overwhelmingly Mexican high school teams that have won the city soccer title.

24. Head Librarian Hector Hernández has made the Rudy Lozano Library in Pilsen into a mecca of future chess masters. The young participants in this program have done extremely well in numerous regional tournaments.


26. This is a page from the St. Francis Crier, a newsletter published by parishioners from St. Francis of Assisi. It is taken from the World War II collection of newsletters compiled by Ramón F. Barba. Published once a month for the price of 5¢, it served to maintain contact between servicemen and women and their home. This issue relates the bravery of PFC Manuel Pérez who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor after his death. He was one of over 500 young men and women who served in the armed forces from this one single parish. The compilation of these newsletters is dedicated to “the men and women of the Mexican-American barrios of Chicago, Illinois, who served this country and died defending their beliefs.”
27. This portrait was used to announce the engagement of Jennie Dianda and Matt Estrada.

28. Joe Ramírez, shown here somewhere in Vietnam, was sworn in nine days after his 17th birthday in 1967. He spent time in Ca Ranh Bay, Quin Nhon, and the Phu Tai Valley. He wrote, “After having our Thanksgiving meal, our company was attacked by VC. All hell broke loose, mortar rounds and heavy small arms…I set up my M-60 and commenced firing. We suffered 8 casualties…I give thanks every Thanksgiving to the 8 dead soldiers and God, that he watched over me.”

29. Doña Isabel Vidales is photographed here in the act of bestowing la bendición, the blessing, on her granddaughter Marissa Garza. Mexican family tradition gives great reverence to these formal blessings given by grandparents, parents, godparents, and other close family members. A blessing is seen as a way to request God’s grace and intercession. The sign of the cross is made on the forehead of the one being blessed.

30. This photograph was used as the front cover in a Chicago Tribune Magazine article (January 18, 1998) about the migration of Mexicans from the Mexican state of Michoacán. The late Rev. John Klein is pictured here with parishioners at the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe’s feast day at Saint Agnes Church in Little Village. There are an estimated 250,000 Mexicans in Chicago from Michoacán. Consequently, if immigrants from Michoacán were counted separately from other Mexicans, they would constitute the second largest Latino group in Chicago. Other Mexican states with a strong presence in Chicago are Guanajuato, Guerrero, Zacatecas, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Puebla, Durango, and of course, Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of The Chicago Tribune, 2001.)
31. Throughout the 1990s and into the new century, numerous pan-Latino efforts to get people naturalized, registered, and to the polls were intensified. In spite of these efforts, Mexicans still voted in lower rates by percentage than the African-American and European-American communities. Hopefully, these young Mexicans will positively change these numbers in the future.

32. The annual Cinco de Mayo Parade, held on Cermak Road in Pilsen or what is also known as the Heart of Chicago neighborhood, has grown dramatically in recent years.

33. Chicago and the Midwest's largest Mexican celebration is the annual Fiesta del Sol. Organized by the Pilsen Neighbors Council, this 30-year-old street festival attracts tens of thousands of individuals every year. Fiesta del Sol helps fund the activities of the Pilsen Neighbors Council, an organization that works on many issues, including housing and education.

34. Since the late 1960s, Casa Aztlán has organized Mexicans around such social concerns as immigration, workers' rights, and political issues impacting Mexicans both here and in Mexico. Executive Director Carlos Arango (second from the left) and others stand in front of the famous mural façade of Casa Aztlán. This mural, painted by Marcos Raya, Salvador Vega, and Carlos “Moth” Barrera, has become one of Chicago's best-known public art works.

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An Immigrant's Perspective, Curricular Unit for Grades 6–12; Developed by the National Museum of Mexican Art with funding from the Terra Foundation for American Art, 2014
35. The mosaic-tile mural on the entrance of the José Clemente Orozco Academy in Pilsen has attracted numerous visitors. Shown here is a section of the almost one-half-block mural. The mural was done by former Orozco art teacher Francisco Mendoza and students over a period of almost 10 years in a project sponsored by the National Museum of Mexican Art. After the new Orozco Academy was built in the fall of 2000, the old Orozco School became part of Cooper School.

36. This mural entitled Prevent World War III was an interesting collaboration between some of Pilsen’s Mexican artists and other city artists. The Mexican artists that worked in this project were Marcos Raya, Carlos Cortéz, José Guerrero, Román Villarreal, and Rey Vásquez.

37. Shown in this photograph is the Hernández family grocery store. It was located at 1100 South Peoria Street in 1921.

38. This is a 1927 photograph of the first Mexican pharmacy in South Chicago. Shown in the photograph are Mr. Galindo and Frances Martinez.

39. Tomasina Mendoza graduated as a registered nurse from Columbus School of Nursing c. 1941. She worked at Marcy Center.
40. Pictured is Teresa de la Cerda in front of La Rosa de Oro market in South Chicago c. 1925. Many small shop-owners served the Mexican communities.

43. Standing in his courtroom wearing his judicial robes is Judge David Cerda. Judge Cerda was appointed an appellate court judge in 1965. He was very influential in the LULAC organization and was the first Mexican to serve as a judge.

41. The Ford Automobile plant at 130th Street and Torrence Avenue is the site of the assembly line pictured here. It was one of the many industrial job sites where men from the surrounding communities worked.

44. Virginia Ojeda is one of Chicago's most successful entrepreneurs. She has also been extremely active on numerous city and community boards.

42. Pictured in a 1980s photo are Jorge Pérez Sr. with his children Gabriela and Jorge Jr. in his panadería—Cristy’s Grocery and Bakery. The bakery is located on 83rd Street near Sullivan School. On the trays are pan dulce waiting to be put into the ovens.
45. Dr. Jorge Prieto, born in 1918, is shown being arrested for participating in a non-violent protest in support of César Chávez, in the 1960s. The Mexican medical profession and the Mexican community were fortunate to have had Dr. Prieto as a role model and health care advocate. This very gentle and humane man repeatedly demonstrated a passionate commitment to the social issues confronting the Mexican communities during the last half of the 20th century.

46. Growing out of the Chicano movement and the social protest movements of the late 1960s and early 70s, through their music and theater, Teatro del Barrio satirically portrayed concerns of the Mexican community.

47. Marcos Raya, at the far right, is shown painting his version of the controversial Diego Rivera mural that was destroyed in New York City’s Rockefeller Center. Raya’s work has been featured at museums across the United States and in Mexico. Ironically, this important tribute to Rivera was later whitewashed.

48. The Zapatista uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994 brought worldwide condemnation to the mistreatment of Mexico’s indigenous peoples. Chicago was no exception, as many individuals from Chicago’s Mexican community rallied to show solidarity with the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. Emma Lozano, sister of slain political leader Rudy Lozano, is shown speaking at a rally.

49. The U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services has a long track record of abusive and capricious treatment of Mexican immigrants. The Mexican flag and iconic images of the Virgen de Guadalupe and Emiliano Zapata are symbolically used here to rally Mexicans around immigration issues.

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