

Name

Period

The House on Mango Street

Historical Context: The Mexican Population in Chicago

According to the 2010 census, two-thirds of the United States' Latino population lives in California, Texas, or Arizona. However, the fourth most populous state for Latinos, especially Mexicans, is Illinois. In 1850, the Mexican population of Chicago consisted of a mere 50 people. By 1920, the census reported 1,200 Mexicans living in Chicago, and there were over one million by the year 2000. Today, many Mexican-Americans living in Chicago can trace their family's history in the city as far back as the turn of the previous century.

The period between 1900 and 1925 was full of change for both Mexico and the United States. Mexico was experiencing a time of political unrest and war, so men looking for better wages crossed the American border. In addition, many people found it unsafe to stay in Mexico, so entire families fled the country for the political or religious safety and the freedoms the United States offered.

At this time, Chicago's economy was heavily reliant on the railroad, steel, sugar beet, and meatpacking industries, but more workers were needed, sometimes to replace employees on strike or men fighting overseas during World War I. Business leaders sent representatives to the Southwest to hire newly arrived Mexican immigrants and transport them north. The recruiters, called *enganchistas*, paid for the new workers' railroad fees and meals on the trip to Chicago, with the understanding that the Mexicans' first paychecks would be docked a percentage until the money was compensated.

They had better-paying jobs in the United States, but Mexicans still struggled. Many worked ten or more hours per shift, and their meals consisted of small portions of bread or watered-down stew, if they ate anything at all. Mexican immigrants had difficulty finding reasonably priced housing because many apartment complexes were owned by Europeans who resented immigrants. Therefore, landlords unfairly raised rent prices for Mexicans, which meant many people lived in the same apartment to be able to afford a roof over their heads. With more people in such small spaces, good health and sanitation was difficult to maintain.

By the early 1920s, American soldiers had returned from war and wanted Mexicans to vacate their jobs and their communities. In Chicago, neighborhoods called *colonias*, or enclaves, were informally established to help keep Mexicans together. Some of those areas included Calumet, on the near West Side of Chicago; the Back of the Yards area, near the stockyards; and Pilsen, on the lower West Side. These enclaves gave rise to tortilla factories, restaurants, markets, and Spanish-language newspapers like *El Ideal*. The 1930 census reports 20,000 Mexicans, both immigrants and American citizens, living in Chicago—an increase of six hundred percent in just ten years.

When the Great Depression hit the United States, Mexicans were seen as expendable and undesirable, so a nationwide campaign of repatriation began. Mexicans were rounded up and sent back to Mexico, even those who were born in the United States and were American citizens. Those who remained in the country had an even harder time getting jobs and food for their families, and some were hurt or killed because of racial violence. At the end of the campaign, about one-third of the Mexican population in the United States had been forced out. In Chicago, the loss was not as severe, in part because of the involvement of social workers and the work of settlement houses' staff, who had already been offering assistance to immigrants for decades.

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By the late 1930s, Mexicans in Chicago began to take action to protect themselves and each other from the difficulties around them. Mutual aid societies were established in the enclaves, which required members to put a portion of their earnings into a community collection box each month. When a member needed money for a serious problem, like unemployment, illness, or death, they were given a portion of the money in the community savings to alleviate the issue. In addition, Mexicans, especially steel workers, joined labor unions like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to win better wages and working conditions and to fight racism they observed in the workplace.

In 1940, there were 35,000 Mexicans living in or around Chicago, but that was about to change. When Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941, Mexicans living in the United States joined the military to fight with the Allied forces in World War II. Some illegal immigrants were able to earn their citizenship this way, including Sandra Cisneros's father. However, there were once again thousands of jobs needing to be filled, so the United States government established the *Bracero* Program (*brazo* means arm in Spanish) to invite guest workers from Mexico into the United States. These men were each on a six-month employment contract to work in agriculture in the Southwest and the railroad industry in Chicago and other major cities. The program ran until 1964.

In the meantime, the Mexican-American community in Chicago continued to expand. Some *braceros* did not return to Mexico when their contracts were up, and they illegally stayed in the country with friends or relatives, taking jobs where they could. *Colonias* spread to larger areas, and an area near Pilsen called Little Village, or *La Villita*, became the center of Mexican culture in Chicago and remains so today. Mexican families also moved out of the city to the suburbs, including Joliet and Aurora, to find more space and larger homes. From the 1950s to the 1970s, organizations like the Mexican Patriotic Committee, the Chicago Area Project, and a branch of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) formed to meet the community, educational, and civil rights needs of the 250,000 Mexican citizens living in the Chicago area in 1970, a number that had increased five hundred percent since 1950.

In the 1970s, the Chicano movement encouraged strength and pride in the Mexican culture in Chicago. Muralists such as Mario Castillo painted reminders of their heritage—from Aztec and Mayan symbols to entertainers, political leaders, and personal family members—as a way to pay homage to their roots. Mexican-Americans also worked in community organizations like the Spanish Coalition for Jobs and the Latino Institute to get the housing, medical coverage, and education they needed for their families. Through these organizations, they were also able to fight unfair employment practices and racial discrimination in the workplace.

Today, Chicago remains a city where the Mexican culture is showcased and Mexican-Americans feel more empowered. Community service and activist groups work to educate Mexican-Americans on the resources and issues that pertain to them, while smaller pride organizations stage citywide celebrations, like the Mexican Independence Day Parade down 26th Street every September. Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art, opened in 1987, has become a major institute for Mexican art and is visited by over 200,000 people annually. Mexican-Americans have earned top offices in local, state, and federal government as representatives of Chicago, and the state of Illinois, and they serve the more than one million Mexican-Americans living in the metropolitan area as of 2010. It is clear that without Mexicans' contributions to the city's industries, community, and culture for over a century, Chicago would not be what it is today.

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Please write your responses to the "Comprehension Check" questions below.

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