

DIVIDED, YET A CITY: A BRIEF HISTORY

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As we approach from the west along a variety of roads, the farmland gives way to a small airport, or to subdivisions with new, inexpensive houses and attendant strip malls, or large undeveloped tracts marked as industrial parks. We are at the western boundary of Aurora, Illinois. Leaving Aurora and for the next forty-plus miles by way of I-88 into Chicago, we drive through one of the fastest growing areas in the United States. The High-Tech Corridor, as it is popularly known, contains research centers famous for their work in particle physics, superconductivity, telecommunications, and petroleum. Amoco Research Center, Argonne National Laboratory, Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, and Rockwell International are anchors for smaller companies with exotic or faddish terms in their names: "robotics," "omni," "concepts," "uni," "networks," "systems." Clearly, much of the economic energy of Northern Illinois has located itself outside of Chicago and within its western cities called, not so long ago, "bedroom suburbs" or "white-flight" suburbs.

The focus of our attention is Aurora. The city does not seem like a suburb, although it sits at the end of the Burlington Northern commuter line. In 1988 it ferried approximately a thousand Chicago-bound commuters from Aurora every weekday morning. Today, the official name of the terminal is the "Transportation Center." In the mid-1850s, however, the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad Company,

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which eventually became the Burlington Northern, constructed the building for repairing locomotives and called it the "Roundhouse." Only thirty years prior, the same locale was part of a forest called "Big Wood," which stretched continuously for approximately ten miles to the north. The Fox River split the forest. The name changes encapsulate the economic and social changes that have troubled and inspired Aurora for the last 150 years.

During the late 1820s and mid-1830s, settlers, many from the Yankee states, began to stake their claims a few hundred yards south of the future Roundhouse. The Sauks, who had crossed the Mississippi to stop the white advance, and a few of the local Pottowatomis occasionally offered fierce resistance. The settlers' small dams irritated the tribes because the dams restricted the movement downstream of an important Native American food—fish.¹ It was easy for the settlers to build dams at this point in the river, however, because of a series of small islands. And build they did: a dam, taverns, a sawmill, a grist mill, and attendant small businesses. Somehow, they also maintained friendly relations with most of the Pottowatomis.² In 1836 the Pottowatomis, by treaty with the United States, agreed to move west of the Mississippi.³

With the removal of the Indians, Aurora, already a village of two-hundred souls, grew even more rapidly.⁴ Stage coach lines, which already linked various Fox River communities to western locales, necessitated the building of hotels. In 1837 Aurora officially registered with the postal department.⁵ "Big Wood" may have provided much of Aurora's building material, but literacy helped to establish ownership and allowed a cash economy to simultaneously bring together and divide the inhabitants of the young community. To further the local economy, the community was quick to establish the institutions that support and promote literacy. Hence, schools began in 1835, although the first building was not erected until 1838 or 1839.⁶ The first library was attempted in 1837.⁷ The first local newspaper appeared in 1846.⁸

By 1848 Aurora had more than a thousand people and was ready to make its most significant economic move: it became a railroad town. It was not, however, a railroad town in the sense of being created by the railroad. Aurora was a market town that was transformed when the railroad located its shops there. During the late 1840s, short-distance tracks were built north and east of Aurora. Less successful railroad companies were absorbed. And, with the building of an easterly track to Chicago, the foundation for one of the most successful railroad

companies in America, the C. B. & Q. (Chicago, Burlington and Quincy), which became the Burlington Northern, was established.⁹ Until at least World War II, the C. B. & Q. was Aurora's economic centerpiece and the city's largest employer. Locomotives were built and repaired along with a variety of railroad cars. In addition the railroad provided local industries and the outlying farms a means to transport their goods. Finally, several industries located in Aurora in order to build machinery for the C. B. & Q.

Aurora, during the nineteenth century was a working-class community. Waves of immigrants came to Aurora. Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, Greeks, Luxemburgers, Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, Dutch, French Canadians, Irish, Hungarians, Roumanians, and Italians arrived during different decades, sometimes replacing each other in the various industries and neighborhoods where they bought homes. In 1870 Aurora's population was 11,162 and its foreign-born population was twenty-eight percent; in 1880 the population was 11,873 and its foreign born was twenty-two percent; in 1890 the population was 19,688 and its foreign born was twenty-four percent. According to Palmer,¹⁰ however, the 1890 figures did not separate foreign born from foreign stock. In 1868 the German presence in Aurora was large enough to support the publication of a German-language weekly, *The Aurora Volksfreund*.¹¹ The Germans also established both Catholic and Protestant parishes.¹²

Housing for the new immigrants was close to the C. B. & Q. shops. Some industries were west of the river. However, the East Side, particularly that area overlooking the rail yards and called Pigeon Hill, became famous for its collection of ethnic groups. Actually, Pigeon Hill was often the second stop for an immigrant working for the railroad. The first stop typically was along the streets at the bottom of Pigeon Hill immediately north and east of the C. B. & Q. shops. As workers earned money, some moved up the hill towards more substantial housing. When the Roumanians attempted this after World War I, however, they encountered resistance from the Luxemburgers and Germans who were afraid their neighborhoods would shortly deteriorate. A decade or two later, Mexicans encountered resistance from the Roumanians.¹³ In short, Aurora was immersed, along with the rest of the United States, in ethnic-versus-native squabbles during the early decades of the twentieth century.

In describing Aurora's ethnic history, one realizes that the city has always been and continues to be, though in even more complicated

fashion, a split community. Even before the immigrants arrived, the river had been the dividing line. For the first two decades or so, floods destroyed Aurora's bridges almost annually. A ferry allowed the two settlements to communicate;¹⁴ nevertheless, economic rivalry meant that the two settlements matured separately. The east side of the river grew faster and was incorporated nine years before its western side. In 1857 both sides were brought together through a state charter that located City Hall in a neutral zone, one of the islands in the middle of the river. In addition, the city's four wards were drawn to span both East and West Sides.

The arrival of working-class immigrants, however, permanently divided east from west. Enclaves of merchants, bankers, and monied others lived on the East Side, but by the turn of the century the East Side consisted mostly of ethnic churches and modest homes within walking distance of industries. The 1900 city directory listed nine ethnic churches on the East Side and only two on the West Side. Four of the East Side's churches were Catholic while the West Side only had one.¹⁵ Increasingly during the nineteenth century, if one had money, one strove to live on the West Side on spacious lots. Long before Aurora's hundredth birthday in 1937, the West Side had acquired the seal of being more Yankee and Protestant, more homogenous, and apparently more arrogant: "They of the West Side feel that they are composed of a little finer texture in the compounding of their anatomy," said one of the city's historians.¹⁶

Political, economic, and ethnic divisions were commonplace as Aurora left the nineteenth century and entered the first decades of the twentieth. The Roumanians, whose numbers accelerated after 1905, immediately preceded the Mexicans. In approximately 1923 the first significant Mexican community developed on the outskirts of Aurora in a boxcar camp maintained by the C.B. & Q. Prior to the establishment of this community, however, Mexicans apparently were living in a variety of areas inside Aurora. For instance, during the 1922-23 school year, the annual report for the grade school located near the center of town states: "The character of pupils attending has changed to a marked degree in that mingled with the children of older residents of the city, is a large proportion of aliens, many of these children having been born in the Balkan states, and in Mexico."¹⁷ This school was far from the boxcar camp, and when the children from the camp started to go to school, they did not go here. In addition, night school enrollments, which had been sponsored for immigrant groups since 1913 by the

Aurora East School District, show that during the 1920-21 school year four "Spaniards" attended.¹⁸ It is unlikely the four were from Spain, for the United States never experienced a significant Spanish migration in the decade after World War I. On the other hand, railroad companies in Chicago had been recruiting Mexicans since 1916. By 1920 the census recorded more than 1,000 Mexicans in Chicago and by 1930 more than 20,000.¹⁹ In short, Mexicans were in the vicinity of Aurora, and probably already living within its boundaries, at least a few years before the start of the boxcar settlement.

The completion of railroads in northern Mexico and the southwestern United States at the turn of the century made Mexican emigration a significant possibility. What was needed, however, was reason to emigrate. Farm work was available throughout the Midwest, and factory and railroad work in the cities. Some emigration had already begun during the first decade of the 1900s, but in 1910 the Mexican Revolution unleashed, for the next decade or so, extensive social upheaval.²⁰ It is after 1910, then, that Mexican immigration to the Midwest accelerated. This period, whose temporal boundaries are fairly well defined, might be called the first wave of Mexican immigration. By and large, most were young single males, who were unskilled, uneducated peasants from the central plateau of Mexico.²¹

Illinois was not the first stop for the immigrants. Statistics gathered in Chicago in 1925 and reported by Kerr state, "only 15 per cent of the Mexicans had come directly to the city from Mexico; 49 per cent had been somewhere else in the United States for two to eight years; 32 per cent had been out of Mexico for more than eight years."²² In Aurora, interviews with the descendants of the first Mexican families reveal a similar migratory pattern. Initial stops, particularly in Texas, were the norm. Then came stops in Iowa or elsewhere to pick beets or other crops, or to work for the railroads in a variety of cities in Illinois and other parts of the Midwest. California and other western states were sometimes part of the itinerary. Socorro Leon, who arrived in Aurora as a young woman, describes in two interviews—the first in English, the second in Spanish—her early experiences and impression of the considerable amount of travel that characterized the first immigrant families:

I have a brother here in Texas for long years, and he loved to come and then go back to us and come, and he didn't stay long with us

[in Mexico] and kept coming back and coming back, and then finally we all decided to come. But it was not good to travel at this time.(I)

. . . It was 1912-1914 before my mother and I came to join the others. You couldn't even travel by train. The cars would become derailed. Something was wrong with the track. It was during the war in Mexico.(III)

. . . We went to my uncle's farm . . . and we stay there for a while . . . and go to see my sister, who used to live in Arizona with a cousin, and we come back to El Paso. . . to my uncle's farm. . . and my mother pass away in 1920. . . [in the other interview she says her mother died in 1918]. I go with my sister that was not married . . . back to Mexico . . . Until 1925 my brother went to see us and he asked me did I want to come to the farm—I said sure. [After arriving at the farm, she met and married her husband.](I)

. . . My uncle was very upset. He wanted to do away with my husband So my brother wrote to my other brother who was living in Aurora.(I)

. . . In order to avoid problems my brother sent us tickets to come to Aurora. . . My brothers wanted to avoid problems within the family.(III)

Mexican immigrants worked in a variety of places but primarily for the C.B. & Q. Forty-one percent of the men worked with the railroad, nine percent worked at the Scaper Works, twenty-six percent were unemployed, about thirteen percent worked as laborers without a place of employment named, and a handful of others worked at the cotton mills, the well works, and various foundries. Not surprisingly, most of the workers lived close to their place of employment.²³ The industrial work and the urban experience contrasted with the upbringing of most of these immigrants. Interviews with a few of them or with their descendants reveal that they were accustomed to farming small *ranchitos* with their extended families. Socorro Leon, for instance, whose family had been shoemakers in Guanajuato, worked with some of her cousins on the farm located in El Paso.(III)

A closer look at the pattern of settlement of Mexican immigrants in Aurora reveals there was one solidly Mexican community that both resisted and eased, perhaps, the transition from Mexican ways to American—albeit the word “American” at this time and locale is not easily identifiable through the hodgepodge of ethnicity. A sense of

these conditions and the need of institutions to dilute and Americanize ethnicity can be gleaned from this 1927 principal's report to the superintendent about Oak Park School, one of the grammar schools in the Pigeon Hill area: "Tho [*sic.*] probably over ninety per cent of the pupils are of alien parentage, all are developing into good American citizens."²⁴ Interestingly, the 1929 Oak Park report counted "about seventeen Mexican children in September [1928] who had never been to school and who could not understand English. They were given a special room by themselves until after Christmas and then placed in the proper grades."²⁵

The one solidly Mexican community that sent many of its children to the Oak Park School was the Eola boxcar camp on the outskirts of Aurora. However, Mexicans also lived near North Broadway, close to the car shops of the C.B. & Q, or along other streets close to other places of work. It is important to keep in mind these two kinds of immigrant settlements: ethnic dispersion as opposed to ethnic concentration. The dispersion of one group into a community consisting of many groups may lead to very different accommodation and/or assimilation patterns compared with the creation of a concentrated community relatively isolated from other surrounding communities. Of course, given, as we will see, the short duration of the boxcar camp, the pattern of Mexican settlement in Aurora has always been one of dispersion. In fact, dispersion may be a general pattern for much of the Mexican settlement of the Midwest. Thus the Midwest becomes extraordinarily interesting in contrast to Mexican communities in other parts of the United States.

Those who lived at Eola worked at the C.B. & Q.'s Reclamation Plant. They called the plant "El Scrape," a Spanish version, perhaps, of the English "scrap." This is where the company sent its old engines to be cut into scrap metal, which was then sorted and sold. The workers used acetylene torches to cut the metal and pneumatic hammers to straighten out bolts and rods. Roumanians, Hungarians, and possibly Poles worked alongside the Mexicans. The children who grew up in the boxcar camp do not remember African-Americans working at the plant or racial and ethnic tensions or any derogatory labels used by the Mexicans for the other nationalities or vice versa.(III and IV)

Railroad boxcar camps (the Mexicans in Eola called theirs "El Campo") were not unusual in the early decades of this century. Aurora had at least one other camp beside the one at Eola. This second camp was north of the Aurora Roundhouse. It had a variety of ethnic groups

as occupants and was smaller than the Eola camp.²⁶ Descendants of the Eola camp remember other camps located in Naperville, the town immediately east of Aurora, and Beardstown, Illinois. This latter camp contained Greeks and Mexicans.(IV) One count lists twenty-six camps maintained by seven railroads in two Chicago-area counties, neither of which includes Aurora. These camps differed considerably in the ratio of single males to families, in the living conditions, and in the percentage of Mexican inhabitants.²⁷

The population at El Campo fluctuated. One former resident remembers about thirty-five families (I), and another remembers several single males who lived and ate with families willing to board them.²⁸ Another former resident remembers his family living for a short while in crowded conditions with another family until his father was able to find a place to rent in Aurora.(I) These conditions suggest the same somewhat fluid conditions that characterized the lives of the Mexican immigrants before arriving in Aurora. For many immigrants, Aurora was just another stop on their journey. For others, however, what may have started as an intended short stay became a lifetime. Several of the children who grew up in El Campo remember a surprising amount of stability in the little community. Rather quickly the camp built a church complete with steeple from lumber and nails supplied by the railroad. For a short period the church was even served by a Mexican priest who was a relative of one of the camp's residents. He lived outside the camp in a nearby town. At other periods, however, the church was served by priests who arrived every Sunday from the nearest Aurora parish.²⁹ Church services were sometimes attended by Mexicans who travelled from Aurora.(I)³⁰ The church also provided communion classes in Spanish.(IV) Also providing social organization to El Campo was a *mutualista*, a self-help society providing a "financial cushion in case of death." Although the *mutualista* was primarily a burial society, it was also a social organization with a constitution, officers, and regular meetings. It also sent small sums of money to the Mexican needy via the Mexican Catholic Church and was a conduit of information about the political, social, and economic affairs then occurring in Mexico.³¹

In some ways El Campo was the center of Mexican life in Aurora. The Mexicans scattered on Aurora's East Side occasionally came to the church located there and to El Campo's *jamaicas*, which were bazaars mostly organized by the women. The *jamaicas* had food, music—sometimes provided by residents of the camp—and maybe even

dancing inside a small hall built in much the same way as the church.(I and IV) National and religious celebrations also occurred at El Campo.³² Mexicans also came for weddings and births, or just to visit. For at least one child in Aurora, travelling to El Campo was special. It was a chance to play baseball and reunite with friends of his own kind.(II)

In contrast, members of other ethnic groups almost never visited.(I and IV) There were, however, occasional visits from a county nurse (II) and from others peddling goods. One former resident tells the story of a baker who, before entering the camp, asked one of the children how to say in Spanish “fresh bread, good bread.” Apparently, the child tricked him into saying *pan apestoso*, which means “foul” or “stinky bread.”(I) The anecdote symbolizes the geographical and cultural separation of El Campo from the rest of Aurora. El Campo was a distinctly Mexican community that attempted to recreate Mexican ways and in the process achieved a degree of stability and identity that attracted other Mexicans. This served to keep out those who were not Mexican.

It is interesting, then, to consider ways in which the residents of El Campo came into contact with the surrounding community and the other ethnic groups. We have already noted that the Reclamation Plant had a variety of ethnic employees. In addition, the residents also travelled occasionally to Chicago or Aurora and its environs and had extensive exposure to Aurora's schools. Travels to Chicago seem mostly to have reinforced Mexican traditions. Chicago at that time had three substantial and thriving Mexican communities largely defined by the nearby place of employment: on the Near West Side in the Hull House area (railroads); South Chicago (steel mills); and Back of the Yards (meat packing).³³ Although the Mexican Aurorans did not identify specific locations, Chicago was visited often, sometimes almost every week, for if one worked for the railroad the trip was free. Sometimes they visited friends, but shopping was particularly favored. It was in Chicago where traditional foods were purchased, and good buys on household items were made.(I) Chicago was also visited during the 1933 World's Fair by at least one of the families from El Campo.(IV) Metaphorically speaking, Chicago was also present in the camp. Orders for food and goods were placed at the Reclamation Plant, where they usually arrived four or five days later.(II) Chicago, in a sense, had a strong presence in the camp. It helped to broaden the camp's sense of Mexicanness, and its knowledge of the United States and the world.

Aurora's influence on the camp was even stronger, however. Day-to-day food and household goods were purchased in Aurora and occasional fairs and company picnics drew those residents willing to walk to the nearest streetcar route. Of greater significance, however, was schooling, which attempted to provide explicit instruction in written and oral language and to Americanize El Campo's residents.

Schooling seems to have influenced El Campo in two ways: through a night school for adults and through parochial and public schooling for children. The first entry describing a night school in the reports to the board of education occurs in 1915. The school

was for the instruction of foreigners in the English language. It also offered a class in citizenship for those seeking naturalization papers who were required to pass an examination which now implies a reasonable knowledge of American governmental methods.³⁴

Aurora's night school was part of a national effort that seems to have doggedly pursued its goals.

The United States government has thru [*sic.*] its Department of Labor put forth a strong and persistent endeavor to secure the attendance at night schools of as many aliens as possible, especially of those who make application for citizenship. Notice is sent to the Superintendent of each alien in the city who applies for citizenship, such notice giving the essential facts concerning him. A personal letter then goes from the Superintendent to the applicant informing him of the night school and urging his attendance. At the same time a somewhat similar letter reaches him from the Department.³⁵

Despite these efforts, two constants seem to have haunted Aurora's night school before the arrival of the Mexicans: poor attendance and the inability to attract women. Even in 1914, the first year of operation, student attendance seems to have been a major frustration for administrators. For the 1915 school year they required a two dollar deposit at registration that would be refunded if the student attended three-fourths of the twenty week term. The following chart compiled from yearly Reports of the Board of Education suggests that the students had difficulty sustaining enthusiasm for night school:

Year	#Of Students	# Of Women	Average Attendance
1914	325	—	—
1915	82	—	—
1916	85	7	—
1917	60	11	—
1918	—	—	—
1919	199	—	65
1920	93	—	32

It did not take long for the Mexicans, after their arrival in Aurora in the early twenties, to appear at night school. During the 1924-1925 school year, twenty-seven Mexicans enrolled. This was the third largest group behind the Germans and Roumanians at eighty-one and sixty-six, respectively. Again, the school district's determination to recruit students is seen in how the immigrants were contacted. During the summer the district, with the help of the Chamber of Commerce, surveyed various employers of foreign workers. Cards were mailed to potential and former students, and announcements were posted in all the industries that employed foreign workers. Despite these efforts, however, the board remained disappointed in the number of immigrants enrolled. Much of the schooling that year, as in prior years, was devoted to the singing of "American patriotic songs" and to saluting the flag. Also, four night-school parties occurred that were variously sponsored by the Kiwanis Club, the Woman's Relief Corps, the Rotary Club, the Daughters of Veterans, the Drama League, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Lions Club, and the Catholic Daughters of America.³⁶ It was the custom of these organizations to provide introductory talks explaining who they were and what they stood for in the community.³⁷

Apparently, the night school was the result of an intense desire among the professional class to integrate the immigrant into American society. This effort, however, created a curious problem among Aurora's Mexican immigrants. The report of 1926, the second year of Mexican attendance, is aglow with the participation of the Mexicans. The Kiwanis and the Community Chest were willing to pay for a bus to El Campo to transport the Mexicans. One hundred twenty-three Mexicans attended, which was more than double the participation of the next largest nationality, and they rarely missed a single night. For the final party, a

Mexican orchestra and a "Glee Club," which is not what the Mexicans themselves called it, provided some of the music. Finally, the demand for more schooling was so great that twenty-three students, including seven Mexican men, were willing to pay twenty-five cents per night for private classes.³⁸ The directors of the night school sensed an eager population on whom they would bestow the gift of American citizenship.

The 1927 report suggests that Mexicans were still by far the largest group, that the bus still traveled to El Campo, and that the curriculum remained the same: that is, a class for beginners and intermediates, who would eventually apply for "first papers," and an advanced class. Students from the advanced class, it was hoped, would apply for "second papers" after studying "spelling," "sentence construction," "grammar," "public speaking," "history," and "civics." The Mexicans in the beginning and intermediate levels, however, "because of their reticency," were taught separately.³⁹ Not until 1928 do the reports clarify the problem:

. . . the Federal Government will provide text-books only for those persons who have received their first papers. The Mexicans are glad to come to Night [*sic*] school but do not care to sever their allegiance with Mexico, and so must buy their own text-books.⁴⁰

Earlier in the report the superintendent says:

While it is highly desirable that all residents of the state should be familiar with the language of the country, it may be questioned whether the community is warranted in expending its resources for such as are unwilling to become citizens of the state.⁴¹

The issues pointed to are of enormous significance both then and now. First-wave Mexican immigrants did not fit into the ideals and expectations of those among Aurora's professional class who believed in the importance of American citizenship. That the idea of citizenship had become paramount is seen throughout the school reports:

Modern educational theory holds that it is not so much the information which the child stores up, but what he gives out in the form of conduct that is the important consideration. Emphasis in education has changed from scholarship to citizenship.⁴²

Indeed, the concept of citizenship had become one of the centers of

educational theory and was driving much of the curriculum in the Aurora schools. To decline American citizenship, therefore, was to ignore an important American value. From the Mexican view, to sever allegiance from Mexico was not realistic. Unlike many European immigrants, most Mexicans planned to return to Mexico after pocketing cash. A railroad trip home did not cost that much and could be accomplished in a few days. As one of the children of those early immigrants said, "The majority of Mexicans were gonna' go back. Ninety-five percent were gonna' go back and why bother with any papers."(II) The belief that learning English was not necessary further complicated matters. Another interviewee, a married woman at that time, said:

Yes, there were night schools back then. My husband never went. It just didn't interest him. For example, there were jobs where English was important, but then there were jobs where English didn't matter. Say, for example, those who worked on the tracks, why would they care to learn to speak English? It was all hard work.(III)

The Mexicans, seemingly, had made a realistic assessment of their needs and goals. To be an American citizen was not necessarily what they desired. As other scholars have suggested, American citizenship may have also made Mexicans more vulnerable in an American system that might not be willing to help them, whereas in remaining Mexican one could always turn to the Mexican consul for assistance.⁴³ In not valuing American citizenship, the Mexicans not only challenged a fundamental icon of the American professional class but also effectively undermined one of the major reasons for learning English at night school. Also undermined was the belief that English might help at the work place. Perhaps the Mexican response was unfathomable to the American professionals, but from the Mexican point of view, night school was unable to locate its importance in the lives of many Mexicans. Nevertheless, between 1928 and 1931 Mexican enrollment compared to other nationalities was very high, though it never again rivalled the enrollment of 1927. The Mexicans continued to be taught separately because of their "reticence." In 1932 the night school closed. Among the reasons for doing so was "the return of many Mexicans to their native land."⁴⁴

As for the children of these first Mexican immigrants, it is notable that they are almost invisible in the Board of Education reports. We have

mentioned the occasional statements that take note of them. In addition, starting in 1929 they also appear on various lists: perfect attendance, graduation to junior or senior high, or the honor roll.⁴⁵ It is interesting that the twenties and thirties brought not only Mexicans to local schools, but also curricular and structural reforms initiated by the Aurora East school system. These reforms were, seemingly, widespread in the United States. However, Aurora East seems to have taken special advantage of research-based reforms through connections with the University of Chicago:

With the opening of the fall term, Dr. Freeman's system of writing, the Zaner, (a simplified form of handwriting) will be introduced in our third and fourth grades. He is at present experimenting with manuscript writing in the first two grades of the elementary school of the University of Chicago and working out a correlation between the two systems of writing.⁴⁶

An interesting experiment was conducted in the various high schools in this section of Illinois and Indiana under the direction of Dr. Judd and the University of Chicago. Each high school principal, who was a member of the Judd Club, gave an achievement test to his senior English classes.⁴⁷

In making itself available to and in incorporating the educational research of the time, the Aurora East school system became distinctly progressive. Various reforms, for instance, the ungraded primary school, had the aura of modernism: "progressive schools throughout the country have been experimenting on the primary level with saner methods of promotion based upon standards of child growth."⁴⁸ The ungraded primary school consisted of grouping children according to their abilities in math or reading despite their official grade: "the success or failure of a child must be measured in relationship to his own capacity to achieve, rather than in terms of the achievement of his fellows."⁴⁹ But progressive reform in the Aurora East system was more far-reaching than this. Heavy reliance on standardized testing in the United States emerged during these decades. One response to testing was the fear that it would encourage "a levelling-off process" in which slow pupils would be retained until they accomplished the goals of the tests and brilliant pupils would be encouraged to attain the goals and no more.⁵⁰ Also appearing was the activity program in which children had first-hand experiences during field trips outside the school and also could

reproduce experiences in the classroom. An example of the latter consisted of children "building the fusilage [*sic.*] of an airplane or the captain's bridge on a boat," thereby "connecting knowledge to facts and acquiring a sense of their working relationship." The activity program, therefore, meant a "loosening up," a "de-formalizing as it were, of the ordinary school program"⁵¹ with the hope of developing "initiative in the children in controlling their own work periods."⁵²

Other examples of progressive reform consisted of experiments in teaching mathematics; the institution of a reading readiness program;⁵³ and the introduction of a remedial reading program.⁵⁴ Many of these reforms were pushed through by Mabel O'Donnell, who in the late twenties became grade supervisor for the primary schools and eventually acquired fame for her Alice and Jerry educational books.⁵⁵ Four assumptions seem to underlie her reports: (1) that research in the learning processes of children and in education in general was generating valuable assessment tools; (2) that this same research was articulating a "natural," hence, scientifically understood, model of childhood behavior that valued the self-expressive individual in a societal context; (3) that a curriculum could be developed that could be monitored, without becoming restricted, by the assessment tools; and (4) that a curriculum that mirrored those "natural" processes not only treated its students more generously but also was superior to other curricula. This last assumption became fact, for administrators at least, because standardized test scores revealed that the Aurora East school district was far ahead of the national norm. From reading the reports, it is not clear whether the administrators thought about the relationship between test scores and a diverse student body. Interestingly, however, the schools within the district receiving the lowest scores were often the most international.

Not all the Mexican children received the progressive education of the public school, however. A number children were sent to Catholic schools despite the cost. Actually, the Catholic school costs, even for laborers, were not prohibitive, and sometimes the schools did not even charge. One family, when faced with the possibility of removing their girls from the school and enrolling them in the public school, was told by the monsignor that the family would not have to pay. By and large, the parochial schools were chosen for religious reasons, not because they were better schools.(III and IV)

According to some of the parents and children, however, the

experience of schooling, whether progressive or not, whether public or private, tended to be about the same. In the following quotations, Frank Barrajas and Ralph Cruz describe their experiences in public and Catholic schools, respectively, during the 1930s in Aurora:

. . . when I first went to school, I didn't understand English, and this big teacher pointin' her finger at me and yellin' at me, and I don't know what she told me, or I don't even know what I did wrong . . . and ever since then, you know, I got behind one year, and my brother he got ahead a year, because he was paying attention, I guess, and he kept goin'.(II)

I'd come home with my hands all blistered up, you know, and Ma says, 'What happened'—and I says, 'Well, they slapped my wrists 'cause I couldn't remember, or I couldn't pronounce, or I couldn't say it like the (other) kids'.(IV)

Language difference was an enormous obstacle for Mexicans and the schools did not institutionalize a way to surmount it. For one family at least, language difference was a problem: "My daughters then began to hate Spanish. They would even hide our Spanish records. They would refuse to speak in Spanish and my husband and I were unable to speak in English. They quit speaking Spanish."(III) Usually parents never spoke English at home, and their attitudes towards formal education were mixed:

. . . I don't think most cared. Well, not all were like that. Lupe (daughter of one of the early families) was told she was not going to learn anything going to school. She was unable to finish elementary school.(III)

. . . my father—and I don't blame him in a way because he had no parents, etc.—but he always used to knock me, in other words, 'What do you wanna take up that junk for—you know—things like this that really pressed me down, you know, but I can understand it because he never had the chance, and he felt that maybe I was crowdin' him or overcoming him.. . . (IV)

There were also informal ways of learning, and it is possible that these unstructured ways produced more learning—at least for the adults. The amount of literacy learning and second-language acquisition in unstructured situations is an area rarely investigated by researchers. The data from oral histories are, of course, less than satisfying. Nonetheless they

do help in understanding what may have been a surprising amount of English literacy and language acquisition among this first wave of Mexican immigrant adults.

For the most part, men learned and used English more than women. They were the ones who went out of the house either to work or, in some cases, to do the shopping. Depending on where the men worked, very little English may have been necessary; still the women tended to stay at home more and have less exposure to English. Nevertheless, one woman later in life did pick up English mostly through soap operas, through a friendship with an English-speaking woman, and through attendance at citizenship classes—not the ones held during the thirties.(II and III)

Women had the most interaction with children. One mother gave her son the blackboard she used in a Mexican school, and the singing of songs, including Mexican alphabet songs, was only performed by women. One alphabet song remembered was *A, B, C, D, ya mi burro se me fue* (my burro has left me); *A, E, I, O, U, el burro sabe mas que tu* (the burro knows more than you). Interestingly, both the alphabet song and the stories of *espantos* (ghosts), *brujeñas* (witchcraft), and buried gold had several purposes. The stories admonished children to behave properly, and the songs teased children and encouraged them to learn.(II and IV)

There was one man, Mr. Frausto Sr., from El Campo whose use of language and literacy was well known beyond El Campo's boundaries. He was known as the community's intellectual, as "high class." He owned a large 1927 Webster's dictionary, but it is claimed that he had owned English dictionaries before arriving in the United States. The 1927 dictionary contains check marks that may have been made while reading English newspapers and encountering words he did not know. Frausto Sr. also owned books, including Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and in his later years was fond of *Time*. His knowledge of a wide range of subjects, large English vocabulary, command of English (he was completely self-taught, his education in Mexico being only a few years), and odd habits, which included a fondness for exercising and sunning himself, endeared him and made him famous among the Mexican residents of Aurora.

It was not uncommon for Mexican men to teach themselves how to read and write English at least minimally. Depending how far a man might advance at his job, a certain amount of writing might be

demanded of him. Socorro Leon's husband, for example, wrote short reports about the work done under his supervision. In time, he became literate enough that most daily affairs could be handled without help. In addition, Spanish and English newspapers occasionally appeared at El Campo. (The Spanish ones, most believe, were printed in Chicago's Mexican community and allowed El Campo's residents, some of whom were subscribers, to keep up with the political happenings in Mexico.) Finally, it ought to be mentioned that although Frausto Sr., along with a few others, encouraged his children to get an education, he did not take an active part in educating them. For instance, he did not read to his children or help them with their reading—nor, for that matter, did any other male parent.(I, II, III, and IV)

El Campo was torn down around 1934, perhaps as a slow phase-out of the Reclamation Plant. Some of the lumber of the boxcars went into building new homes in Aurora for the former residents.(II and IV) With the dismantling of El Campo, the only true Mexican community in the Aurora area disappeared. With the decrease of Mexican immigration caused by the Depression, Mexican growth was effectively curbed. The Mexican population became scattered among streets mostly on the East Side, with little chance to establish definably Mexican social institutions. If anything, the Mexican presence in Aurora at this time probably decreased because of repatriation. The story of repatriation is long and complex, and it is hard to determine how it affected Aurora. During the 1920s, when more stringent immigration laws were enacted, it is estimated that one half of the Mexican nationals living in the United States were illegal. Illegal immigration, however, did not create a problem until 1929. With the onset of the Depression, unemployed aliens, in particular, began to be seen as an important drain on American social institutions. However, during the first stage of repatriation (1929 to 1933), repatriation was sometimes seen as beneficial by the aliens themselves. During the second stage (1933 to 1937), the "requirement for proof of legal residence became the basis for repatriation." During the third stage (1937 to 1941), repatriation became a "dreaded weapon" of deportation, which, though rarely initiated, did remove some long-time immigrants and their American-born children. Major shifts in the Mexican population, a partial result of repatriation, occurred in Chicago,⁵⁶ but the effects of repatriation on Aurora remain undocumented.

Aurora's first wave of Mexican immigrants, now depleted and dispersed, continued to raise families, and, for the most part, to send their

children to school. In time most of the adults, if not all, became American citizens, but not necessarily for the grand ideals advocated by the early administrators of the night school. For Socorro Leon's husband, the reasons were pragmatic. He chose citizenship to insure that he would receive his pension. Some of the children went on to graduate from high school or college; others did not finish high school. Some became professionals; others joined the labor pool obtaining jobs that demanded a level of skill that their fathers never had. Interestingly, one son writes for a newspaper, another was a supervisor in a factory, and another is a non-degreed electronics technician/engineer involved in research and development.(I, II, III, and IV)

Also interesting is that with notable exceptions, the adults and their children have become a somewhat conservative elite. For instance, they criticize the most recent wave of Mexican immigrants, pointing to the quality of the immigrants' Spanish and English and how they do not encourage their children to speak English. The conservatives also claim that the newer immigrants refuse to assimilate and to make a commitment to stay in the United States. The conservatives also say that the public schools' bilingual programs do not encourage the learning of English. To a certain extent, the conservatives seem to have forgotten their earlier troubles in the school system or that many first-wave immigrants also did not intend to stay in the United States. Nevertheless, all, whether conservative or not, are proud of their Mexican background and proud that their own children or that they themselves have often married into the Anglo mainstream. Intermarriage itself, however, has led to a set of mixed feelings among the third-generation descendants of the first immigrants. The third generation does not know Spanish when the Anglo community expects them to. Some within this third generation have diligently pursued Spanish courses, a fact that parents or grandparents find curious.(I, II, and III)

Shortly after World War II and into the late 1960s, a second wave of Mexican immigration appeared. The Aurora they encountered was not the one of the twenties and thirties. The railroad continued to be a major employer, but opportunities to work in factories created a more diverse pool of employers. Some who were members of this wave remember other Mexicans employed at Bench Wire Assemblies, Thor Power Tool, Caterpillar, Austin Western, Aurora Paperboard, Barber-Greene, Standard Coil, Process Plastic, AllSteel, and Western Electric.(V and VI) For the first wave of immigrants, Austin Western along with the Burlington

had been major employers, but as Aurora moved through the second half of the century its economy became increasingly diverse. However, diversity of employment was symbolic of both cultural and residential diversity. For instance, nothing comparable to El Campo, an isolated, single-ethnic community replicating a limited version of its native culture, was able to emerge. The second-wave immigrants did not appear in large enough numbers to form such a community. Neither did they necessarily settle on Aurora's East Side, though most did. If workers during the earlier decades lived within walking distance of their places of work, the diversity of employers and the availability of cars allowed the Mexicans increasingly to populate the West Side.

Aurora became even more profoundly diverse because of the arrival of two other Latino groups, Puerto Ricans and *tejanos* (Texans of Mexican ancestry or descendants of Mexicans who were natives of Texas when it belonged to Mexico). Moreover, the women from all three groups were more willing (there is some reason to believe that the Puerto Rican women and *tejanas* may have been the most willing) to enter the labor force in contrast to the Mexican women from the first wave.

In many ways, however, second-wave immigrants resembled the first wave. Both waves had roots in the same regions of Mexico. Both waves also had travelled and worked in a variety of places in the United States before arriving in Aurora, and after arrival occasionally returned to Mexico. In short, both waves did not necessarily come to Aurora with the intention of staying, and so they did not immediately become citizens. In addition, both waves had similar levels of education, were accustomed to hard work, and had children who attended the same parochial and public schools and who, typically, received more education than their parents.

As with the first wave, there are instances of self-education. One man, a railroad and factory laborer who was born in Texas and minimally schooled in Mexico, claims to have read the story of Napoleon, *Don Quijote*, the history of the Aztecs, and three or four of the "Shakespeare books." For him the reading of books and the experience of some schooling have made him less of a believer in religion and in stories of *espantos* and *brujerías*. In his story we can hear, perhaps, the tension between traditional values and those of education:

In fourth grade I went to a school where the principal was a friend

of my father's. He was very smart, his name was Donato De LaVara. That was my first teacher that I will always remember. He was very smart. When I was a kid and was on the ranch with my dad. My dad only went to school for one year. But he learned to read and write and he could multiply and add but not too many numbers. But he used to tell me, do you believe in heaven? I would answer, my teacher Donato De LaVara says there is no heaven . . . He (De LaVara) knew of this (Copernicus). I having a good memory would pass these things onto my dad. My dad wanted to know. If he had lived a long life, he would know these things like I have learned.(V)

The most distinguishing characteristic of the second wave, however, was the emergence of social structures that, intentionally or not, tended to bind the Mexican community together. During the fifties and accelerating after that, the first businesses appeared. They were few enough that many informants can name the families who ran them. It is unclear, however, whether these families were from Mexico or Texas. Despite a small and scattered community, there were businesses that survived because of Mexican or *tejano* clientele. One of the more popular grocery stores during the fifties and later was the Casablanca. It was here or in the various East Side Catholic churches that Mexicans, *tejanos*, and Puerto Ricans met other Latinos who did not work or live beside them. The first owner of the store also sold insurance, prepared income taxes, and did notary public work.(V and VI) In providing these services, he became a bridge linking the Latino community to American institutions and institutional literacy.

During the late fifties or early sixties another kind of social structure began to appear. A subsequent owner of the Casablanca began to rent the local ice rink to hold Mexican dances. Within a few years Mexican Independence Day festivals with reigning queens and attendance of at least one hundred were celebrated yearly. Some of the organizers of these festivals were responsible for starting the Latin American Club, which still exists. One of the former secretaries of the club recalled that in 1967 there were about thirty members. He also remembered that the minutes before 1967 had been kept very carefully. The Latin American Club soon took charge of *Fiestas Patrias*, the traditional Mexican patriotic festival held all over Mexico and in the United States wherever a sizeable Mexican or Mexican American community exists. Other Latino organizations that appeared during the sixties were *Club Guadalupeño*, an organization with religious connections, LULAC (League of

United Latin American Citizens), and a Puerto Rican club. The Puerto Ricans identified the Latin American Club as being primarily Mexican. It is important to remember, however, that not everyone within the second wave of immigration made alliances beyond immediate friends and family. There is evidence that some chose to associate very little with the Mexican and other Latino communities.(V and VI)

Political efforts by Latinos were begun during the late fifties and early sixties. One of the descendants of the first wave of immigrants became, some believe, the first Latino to run for public office. Other descendants began to participate actively in the Democratic Party. Moreover, during the mid-sixties, Jesuit priests with a social agenda helped form the Centro Hispano Americano whose purpose was to unite a fragmented Latino community and open factories to Latino workers (II). In addition, the Latin American Club became the site for political speeches from mainstream candidates attempting to attract the Latino vote.(VI)

As the Mexican community entered the seventies, it seemed that a certain amount of social organization had rooted itself within Aurora. Nothing comparable had emerged during the first wave. Granted, the appearance of *tejanos*, Puerto Ricans, and even Cubans had complicated the possibility of further social organization. Each group speaks a different dialect of Spanish, eats different foods, and maintains different cultural beliefs, musical tastes, identities, and national loyalties. The result of these differences was and continues to be rivalry, but it also results in a distinctive condition that seems to occur among small communities that locate within and beside each other. Aurora's Mexican community is a "soft shell" community⁵⁷ penetrated not only by other Latino groups but by other races and cultures as well. One consequence of this condition has been that Aurora's mainstream population and institutions, except for the administrators and teachers who work within the school district's bilingual programs, have been unable to distinguish one Latino group from another. Furthermore, as the children of these groups mature, there seems to occur a mingling of cultural identities tending towards a generic Latino identity. This becomes evident during festivals in which Puerto Rican food is sold beside Mexican food and Puerto Rican contestants compete against Mexicans in the singing of traditional Mexican songs. Linguistic evidence is also available, though the phenomenon will not be discussed here. The important issue, however, is that, before the third wave of immigration, Aurora's Mexican community was simultaneously creating a social organization

and disappearing into a larger Latino identity and, to a lesser extent, into a larger mainstream identity. In short, the size of the Mexican community was not large enough to prevent dispersion into smaller Latino communities or into the mainstream.

However, when the third wave of Mexican immigration started to arrive during the late sixties and early seventies, the social institutions, to a certain extent, were unable to absorb them. With the exceptions of the Catholic church and the business community, which began to proliferate rapidly, the new arrivals ignored many of the social organizations created by second-wave immigrants. Sometimes, the new arrivals created their own organizations or relied instead on ad-hoc networks of friends, family, and church officials to help them. Today, Mexican life, indeed Latino life, on Aurora's East Side seems highly tentative. Housing is poor and insubstantial, and it is suspected that there are large numbers of illegal immigrants but they remain uncounted. In addition, school administrators complain about the mobility of students. For instance, in the 1985-86 school year the mobility rate in the district was thirty-two percent, while some buildings with Latino concentrations were above forty percent. In comparison, the state average was twenty-one percent.⁵⁸ Also, the high school cannot raise its low graduation rate. In the 1985-86 school year, the rate was fifty-eight percent while the state average was seventy-six percent. These statistics mean that forty-two percent of the freshmen who entered Aurora East High School in 1982 did not graduate in 1986.⁵⁹ The context for these figures is that as of 1987 Latinos were forty-three percent of the student population, the largest student population in the district.⁶⁰ Examining other aspects of Latino life on the East Side, it is clear that a significant gang problem exists, political organizing has not taken hold, and city policy-making occurs without significant input from the Latino community itself. The general impression is that this new wave of immigration has overwhelmed not only the nascent social organization started during the second wave of Mexican immigration but, more significantly, has taxed the economic, educational, and political institutions of Aurora itself.

This third wave of immigration has occurred within an equally unsettling economic context. Aurora has experienced an almost tide-like local economy that receded first but has recently returned with unexpected vitality. During the early seventies, Aurora began to suffer the problems of other industrial Midwestern cities. Its large factories

were whiplashed by economic problems, lay-offs, strikes, and closings. In 1974 the Burlington Roundhouse, which had long been the center of Aurora's economy and the major employer of Aurora's immigrant groups, closed.⁶¹ In addition, the downtown deteriorated. Many businesses closed, and city leaders were appalled by some of the businesses that appeared: tattoo parlors, a small hubcap business, and prostitution. The downtown had been deteriorating since the sixties in part because of the competition of nearby malls.⁶² More serious competition appeared in the early seventies, however, with the annexation of land beyond the eastern boundary of Aurora's East Side. Here, cornfields became enormous malls with attached subdivisions.

By 1987 the far East Side malls serviced 42,000 shoppers daily. The area had acquired 5,000 inhabitants (40,000 are projected), and a new 1,500-student high school had been filled to capacity.⁶³ The growth since 1987 has not stopped. Aurora has survived the tensions between East and West Sides, between settlers from the East and newly arriving immigrants, between the more or less well-off and the less well-off. However, an unpredictable third element has entered the equation. Those living on the far East Side identify more with the fast-growing city to their east, Naperville, not with the old money of Aurora or with its Spanish-speaking poor. These new inhabitants of Aurora are largely professional and attached to the explosion of new jobs from the high-tech corridor. Their roots are elsewhere and their housing turnover is rapid, duplicating, more than likely, the two-year-nine-month turnover rate of their trendy neighbor, Naperville.⁶⁴ The split between old and new was seen in a recent city election when thirty-seven percent of old Aurora voted compared to only thirteen percent of the newcomers. During a city meeting about the location of a betting parlor, the newcomers argued heatedly.⁶⁵ Aurora is determined to integrate this group and attract even more like them to other recently annexed areas. The Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission projects Aurora's population to be 151,000 by the year 2005 and that of Naperville, ten miles to the east, to be 103,000. Combined, the two cities "will be the second largest metropolitan area in the state, the largest outside of Chicago."⁶⁶

As part of this new growth and to attract more of it, Aurora renovated the old Roundhouse and called it the "Transportation Center." "Big Wood," "Roundhouse," "Transportation Center"—these are names that reveal the shrewdness of a community darting quickly to where the opportunity lies. Each name sums up the conditions of its time:

Bigwood—land clearing performed by hardy pioneers, Roundhouse—industry built with the hands and minds of immigrants and native-born capitalists, and Transportation Center—the new “network” economy invented by young technocrats and dependent on the mobility of workers, goods, and services. Ironically, only a hundred yards from the Transportation Center and hidden from view by a railroad levee is a string of very modest homes. This is the border of one of Aurora’s largest Latino enclaves. This area contains homes that at one time were occupied by other kinds of ethnic residents.

The symbol of this juxtaposition is clear: Aurora is split between its aspirations to become an elite community, a fashionable address in America’s future, and its difficult reality. Spanish-speaking communities, with their traditionally low educational levels are, from the mainstream point of view, unable to compete in the high-tech world.

Many in Aurora are not sympathetic to the Spanish-speaking. Therefore, those who remain culturally different will be overwhelmed if they do not acculturate. As the mayor has stated, “Immigrant and minority groups who have moved here will become more culturized [*sic.*], as we all do. . . . The melting pot still works.”⁶⁷ The overtures made to the Latino communities, such as Puerto Rican Day and Mexican Independence parades (both are rarely attended by those from the mainstream), pose as celebrations of Latino life. However, they are shallow appeasements meant to soften the tensions between Latinos and Anglo-dominated institutions. Such institutions in Aurora simply do not know what to do with one-fourth of the city’s population that lives so conspicuously on its East Side. Occasionally, an institution attempts to hide them from the view of the monied mainstream the city wishes to attract. Some Latinos believe this was one of the motives behind a 1988 school board attempt to stop publishing the East Side school’s bilingual newsletter. Extensive housing rehabilitation had recently occurred in the district in order to make the district attractive to home buyers. This motive, attracting the mainstream, of course, was never publicly admitted but remains the interpretation of some members of the Latino group that protested and eventually reinstated the newsletter.

Aurora’s history of divisiveness continues as the city approaches the twenty-first century. After two decades of economic trouble, the opportunity to capture a new kind of wealth is hindered mostly by what city fathers call an “image problem.” The Latino community, somewhat dispersed yet numerous, unsure of itself in an alien environment,

fragmented, and politically unorganized, does not have the stability to protect itself on all fronts from mainstream forces. Moreover, with the recent changes in immigration procedures, it is possible that Mexican immigration may significantly slow down, meaning that the main device for discouraging the processes of mainstreaming, namely, uncontrolled growth, may be over. If this should occur, the Latinos' future may resemble the experiences of the first-wave immigrants, when the Depression and repatriation allowed mainstreaming to take hold.

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