MEXICAN WORKERS IN AURORA: THE ORAL HISTORY OF THREE IMMIGRATION WAVES, 1924-1990

Irene Campos Carr

The town of Aurora grew by the banks of the Fox River in a valley heavily populated by Pottawatomies. Their well-known chief, Waubonsee, is still remembered in the area with a community college and a high school named after him. The prairie land of the natives, however, was claimed by the federal government when white men from the east began to settle by the river in the early 1830s.[1]

In a few years Aurora was incorporated as two villages, East Aurora in 1845, West Aurora in 1854. They merged in to one city in 1857. From its inception, Aurora was perceived by its population as two towns divided by the Fox River, which separated the East side's heavy industry plants and working-class homes from the affluent in West Aurora. This unofficial division has persisted throughout the years.[2]

The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy (C. B. & Q.) Railroad, the most significant industry in Aurora for the following century, had a modest beginning in 1850 with a little engine and a coach running on a new railroad reaching the town. In 1856, a round house, machine shop, and paint and carpenter shops were completed in Aurora. Factories and stores followed, providing opportunity for employment and prosperity for those heading west to seek their fortune.[3]

In 1867, the city of Aurora voted to raise $50,000 through taxes to help the C. B. & Q. buy additional railroad property. Within ten years the railroad shops employed one thousand men, and the C. B. & Q. became nationally known for its development of railways in the Midwest. As the

largest employer in Aurora, the railroad paid eighty percent of the total wages paid in the city during the late 1800s.[4]

The Fox River, new roads, a railroad center, and the proximity to Chicago spurred the economic development and growth of the city. Railroad and industry in Aurora attracted newly arrived immigrants to Aurora. Although Germans were the first and largest group of immigrants to come to Aurora, they were soon followed by Swedes, French Canadians, Irish, Luxemburgers, and Hungarians. The early years of the twentieth century marked the arrival of a large number of Romanians and a small number of Mexicans.

Those born in the United States, and earlier ethnic immigrants such as the Germans, held the skilled jobs required to build and repair the railroad engines and freight cars. The newest immigrants to Aurora, the Romanians, Hungarians and Mexicans, were hired for the unskilled, backbreaking jobs in the reclamation plant. Most of the early Mexican arrivals came to Aurora in the 1920s. They came from Mexico and other areas of the United States after learning there was work on the railroad.

The first wave of Mexicans arriving in Aurora in the second decade of the 1900s left Mexico to escape the political and economic instability of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917). Once in the United States, they often looked for jobs in the Southwest or on farms in the Midwest. Sometimes they heard about work in the railroads. Frank Barajas, who grew up in Aurora railroad camp during the 1920s, relates:

> My dad came here when he says he was either 18 or 19 years old, and he worked for the railroad. I guess he followed the railroads all the way to California, and then he figured he had some money, and he went back to Mexico and married my mom and brought her up.(I)[5]

From relatives and friends they learned of jobs at Aurora's C. B. & Q.'s reclamation plant, and they came to work for the railroad. Once in Aurora, Mexicans worked in the repair shops downtown or at the Eola scrap yard. Ralph Cruz observes that:

> they gave the Mexicans most of the dirty jobs. My father was a scrap sorter . . . and all he did was when the cars came in he would take a torch and then cut them in pieces and then they would sort the metal. . . . (IV)

He remembers the Eola scrap dock as a large area where the railroad

deposited the old engines to be cut and sorted for recycling purposes. Some of the workers stripped the metal from the engines, others used pneumatic hammers to straighten the rods, while the rest cut them into pieces with a torch and then sorted them. A large electro magnet sorted and picked up the steel and placed it in railroad cars. It was then taken to the steel mills and remelted.(IV)

During the early years of the settlement, the railroad workers were predominantly male. It was not until the late 1930s and during World War II that some Mexican women worked with the men in the scrap yard. Perez Padilla's mother sorted scrap materials at the C. B. & Q. shops. Padilla also worked for the railroad in the 1940s and managed to get a job driving a fork lift after proving her ability to handle what had been considered a "man's job."[6]

The Mexicans working at the scrap yard, *el escrape,* developed into a small, close-knit community living in twenty-one box cars by the railroad tracks near the reclamation plant. Much like other railroad companies throughout the United States, the C. B. & Q. provided the box cars rent free along with some kerosene and coal for lamps, heating and cooking. A pot belly stove in the middle of the car was the only source of heat in the winter. The community water pump and the outhouses were located in a central area in the camp. Cruz, one of the children who lived in the box cars, tells of being so cold in the winter that he slept with his clothes and shoes on but still could not get warm.(IV) Barajas recalled the winter also:

> In the wintertime his mother'd whack him [Cruz] one and say, "Go out there and take your bath for tomorrow." He'd go out there, wet his hair a little bit, wet his hands a little bit, wet his hair a little bit and come back and say, "I'm done." The box car was cold.(I)

Most of the Mexicans who settled in the camp arrived as families; a few came without their families but soon sent for them. Often a newly arrived family would share a box car until they found another place to live. Barajas remembers Antonio Cruz saying to his (Barajas') father: "Stay with us until you get settled down."(I) Single men frequently stayed with a family. Usually only a curtained partition separated them from their host. Single men often returned to Mexico, married and traveled back to Aurora.(I)

The first wave of immigrants, according to some of their children, crossed the border by simply buying a bridge ticket for fifty cents.

Traveling from the interior of Mexico, however, often required hiding from soldiers as well as revolutionaries. The Perez family remembers traveling by wagon with the children covered by straw. Ralph Cruz recalls childhood stories about his father and other Mexican revolutionaries blowing up railroad tracks to get the steel to make the parts to repair German Mowser guns. The parts were machined with a file and tempered with bonfires in mountain hiding places. Afraid of getting caught, the elder Cruz escaped to the United States with his family in 1919.(IV)

The box car camp families in Aurora became a cohesive and stable community comprised of thirty-five to fifty families with a prevailing sense of cooperation and interdependence.[7] For instance, during the periodic distribution of the C. B. & Q.'s free coal to the camp families, Ruben Frausto's father voluntarily checked the unloading of the coal from the railroad car. He also kept track of the number of fuel barrels for each family to make sure that everyone received enough coal.(I)

For recreation there was a small baseball field in the camp area where loud and hotly contested games took place. In addition, the Fraustos had a 1925 Sears Silvertone battery radio that became the center of attention the night of the 1927 Tunney-Dempsey fight in Chicago. Nearly twenty five people gathered around the radio. Even Anglos from across the field walked over to the little box car camp to listen to the boxing match on the radio.(II)

The families held yearly celebrations with food, live music, and dancing, that drew the other Mexican families in Aurora to the camp. Called *jamaicas,* these large celebrations were memorable affairs for the children of the early immigrants. Other sources of socialization were their frequent trips to Chicago using their C. B. & Q. train passes. The families shopped in the Mexican stores and enjoyed get-togethers with the larger Mexican community in the city.(I)

A small Catholic church at the camp was built in 1927 by the Mexican workers and lasted until the dissolution of the camp in 1934. The first priest was a relative of the Perez family. Like other Mexican and Spanish priests who had fled the anticlerical wave sweeping revolutionary Mexico, he returned to his country after the war. Subsequently, the railroad workers from the camp were attended by priests from the nearest Catholic church, St. Therese. Other Mexican families in town also came to the church to hear Mass and participate in religious activities. A church organization, the *Asociación Católica para Jovenes*

Mexicanos (Association for Catholic Mexican Youth [ACJM]), brought together many town and railroad camp Mexicans. The parents, in turn, sent their children to St. Therese School or to the closest public school.(I)

One mother saved her pennies and sent the children to the parochial school and later to Marmion Academy (a Catholic military preparatory high school in Aurora) without her husband's knowledge. Strongly anticlerical, her husband refused to let her go to church. When he found out she had secretly attended mass, he punished her by making her kneel down on the floor. "Once a neighbor saw her kneeling down and wondered what had happened," recalls Mrs. Leon.(II) Since the husband worked long hours at the railroad yards, he never discovered his wife was sending their children to Catholic schools. Seemingly compliant, this traditional Mexican wife acted independently and according to her conscience.

Americanization classes for adult immigrants were provided by the East Aurora School District beginning in the 1913-1914 school year. Although Barajas, Frausto, and Cruz have no memory of their parents attending night school, Julia Perez Padilla remembers her mother going to class. She did not return to school because she was the only woman in her class and felt the men were making fun of her. Her father, on the other hand, learned to speak English.

According to C.M. Bardwell, Superintendent of Schools, the fall-winter evening classes met twice a week "for the instruction of foreigners in the English language, and also included a class in citizenship designed for those who were applicants for naturalization papers and who were required to pass an examination which now implies a reasonable knowledge of American governmental methods."[8] In the first year, there were 325 adult students. In 1916, the superintendent reported a strong effort by the United States Labor Department to recruit as many aliens as possible to attend the classes, especially those who had applied for citizenship. After receiving a government notice listing the names of alien applicants, the superintendent wrote letters to the prospective citizens informing them of the classes and urging their attendance.[9]

It was not until 1925 that Mexicans attended classes. That year twenty-seven were enrolled. That same year the school reported a survey of the number of foreigners employed in the city's industry, observing that it did not include the Mexican laborers employed by the Burlington Shops

(C. B. & Q. railroad shops). The survey showed a large percentage of the aliens were not attending classes. To encourage them to attend, five hundred post cards were sent out to these employees and posters placed in the departments of the industry surveyed.[10] Mexican workers were ignored in the foreign employee survey and presumably in the promotion of the classes.

During the 1925-26 academic year, night classes were held in three school buildings. The largest ethnic group was Mexican, with 127 students, including four women, enrolled out of a total registration of 244 adult students. The night school teacher reported:

> . . . Mexican men and women from the box cars of Eola came to the Oak Park [school] classes. On account of the condition of the streets, a bus had to be engaged to bring them to the building. The Kiwanis Club of Aurora paid for three weeks of this service and the rest of the year was paid for by the Community Chest. Very few Mexicans missed a single night of school.[11]

The monthly parties sponsored by civic and patriotic organizations were a popular feature during night school classes. Germans, Swedes, Romanians, Mexicans, and other immigrants studying English and civics, socialized and presented entertainment programs at the parties. The Mexicans had an orchestra, a Glee Club, and gave recitations. When the classes ended in late March, there was a demand for more and private classes were arranged. Students were charged a "small fee of twenty five cents per night or $2.50 for ten nights, paid in advance. Twenty-three enrolled in these classes, seven of these being Mexican men."[12]

The following year, Mexican adult students continued to be the largest number attending, with 97 registered out of a total student enrollment of 177 adults. The second largest group was German, with 34 in attendance. Mexicans constituted more than half of the students enrolled and were again brought in by bus from the box car camp. During the 1926-27 school year, however, the school began to segregate Mexican students. "Three classes of work were offered: beginning, intermediate and advanced. It was decided to keep the Mexicans in classes by themselves in the beginning and intermediate groups because of their reticency [*sic*.]," wrote the new teacher, Mabel Fraser.[13] The previous year, Mexican students socialized freely with other immigrants during the monthly parties, according to the teacher's

report. But in the following school year, these students became "reticent" and were separated from eastern and western Europeans. Mexican attendance became irregular "because of the constant changing of their working conditions" according to the same 1927 report.[14]

Mexicans were again separated during the 1927-28 school year. Beginners were separated because the federal government provided texts only to those who had received the preliminary "first papers" leading to naturalization. "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."[15] In the same 1928 school report it is observed that although it is "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."[16]

That year the number of Mexican adult students enrolled dropped to 38 but still remained the largest group.

Although no accurate count is available, Mexicans were the newest immigrants and constituted the smallest percentage of Aurora's newcomers in the 1920s and early 1930s. Intent on learning English and the culture of their new country, whether they wanted to become citizens or not, Mexicans attended evening classes in greater numbers than any other immigrant group in the city, according to the school records of those years. However, in 1932 the night school was discontinued "owing to the decline in immigration, the return of many Mexicans to their native land, and the depression."[17] The Americanization classes remained closed until 1940.

Mexican immigration to Aurora was stopped by the Depression and the harsh repatriation laws. Although none of the Mexican families in Aurora seems to have been deported, according to some of the immigrants' accounts of the period, one of the Board of Education reports (1932) alludes to the return of Mexicans to their country. Generally, Mexican workers were protected by the C. B. & Q., an employer that did not want to lose its hard working employees. Although the men had less work at the railroad shops, their jobs were stable and their rent-free living quarters helped them economically. In addition, railroad workers received some aid in the form of food and clothing during the Depression. Barajas and Cruz remember that as boys they wore the railroad-issued corduroy pants Barajas and his friends called "whistle britches" because they made a swishing noise as they walked.(II, IV)

To make more money when work at the railroad plant was slow, some families, primarily fathers and sons, traveled in the spring to the Iowa farm fields to cut asparagus, top beets, and weed between the rows of plants. Families like the Fraustos and the Barajas would "top" sugar beets for three weeks in the summer. Barajas, whose family worked as farm labor before settling in Aurora, was told that he was born in Iowa in the "middle of a sugar beet field." At the age of twelve, after his family moved from the box car camp, Barajas and the male members of his family cut asparagus in a nearby farm in the early dawn hours. Barajas remembers trying to get the field work done before he returned home to eat breakfast and go to school.(II)

In 1934 the railroad decided to begin phasing out the scrap docks and asked the families to move. Although many of the men continued to work in *el escrape* for some years to come, the families were forced to look for other housing.(IV) As old box cars were discarded, their beams and lumber were used to build the homes of some of their former occupants who joined the few and scattered Mexican families living in the East side of Aurora.(IV) The men from the camp came together more than once to have a "building bee" where they raised the frame of a new house for one of the families in their community.(II)

Some families stayed temporarily with friends, *compadres* and *comadres* (names used mutually by godparents and the parents of the godchild to indicate their relationship), while they looked for a house in town. Frausto's father invested his life's savings of $1,700 to buy a Sears and Roebuck pre-cut six room house in Aurora.(II) Others buying houses in neighborhoods where no Mexicans had lived previously faced petitions signed by neighbors who did not want them living close to them. Socorro Leon's neighbor, a German immigrant, started a petition to keep them out. The petition, however, was disregarded by the neighborhood, especially by those who already knew the young Mexican couple. Not knowing who was responsible for the petition, Leon's husband offered to help his German neighbors with some heavy cement work in their back yard. Consequently, the relationship between them changed and became very friendly. The Leons later received very contrite apologies for the misguided petition.(III) The thrifty railroad workers saved their money very carefully for many years to buy the homes where they lived for the rest of their lives. Most of the first Mexican immigrants remained with the C. B. & Q. until they retired.

Leon's husband, for example, worked for forty-seven years in the railroad yards.(III)

Although the majority of the immigrants worked for the railroad, there were a few who worked at the Western Scraper Company (later Austin Western). It manufactured road machinery and was located within the area of the box car camp. Others worked at the Aurora Cotton Mills or other local industries.(I)

The Mexican immigrants in Aurora stressed the importance of hard work and education to their children. Barajas' father told him: "Try to do your best even if its only to try to spit farther than someone else."(II) Joe Hernandez's father instilled in his children the drive to improve their lives through education and hard work. "His dream was to see us graduate from high school . . . and that we wouldn't end up in the same situation [as him] . . . always living in the same type of hard working job that he did."(II)

Parents also insisted that their children supplant their first language with English and increase their opportunity for success in the United States.(II) Therefore, assimilation took place rather quickly for the offspring of these families. An added factor insuring a rapid assimilation was the very small number of Mexicans in Aurora. Barajas and Frausto still insist on the importance of being Americanized. They speak with some contempt of the more recent Mexican immigrants who want their children to remain Spanish-speaking and wish to continue to enjoy their own culture.(I, II) Many of the grandchildren of these early families are college educated, have married non-Mexicans, have never learned Spanish, and seldom associate with the new Mexican immigrants. Nevertheless, to the Anglo American population of Aurora they remain "Mexicans."

The second wave of Mexican immigration started with a handful in the 1940s, quickened shortly after World War II and lasted to the late 1960s. In some cases, the new arrival was a young Mexican-born bride of one of the young men raised in the railroad camp in Aurora. The groom, perhaps during a visit to relatives in Mexico, would meet, court his wife-to-be, and bring her to this country after the wedding. One new bride found herself ensconced in the home of her in-laws in Aurora while her husband was away in the war. She was surprised that Mexicans were subjected to so much prejudice. She recalls going to a restaurant in Aurora with her in-laws and not being served because they were Mexican. When she found out, she said,

> I was furious. I stood up and yelled at them. I thought, why didn't they see that mark [being Mexican] when they accepted him [her husband] in the U.S. Army?. . . They had a poor image of us, they always thought we were the worst. They looked at us as if we were strange creatures.[18]

She added that she felt Mexicans were not accepted at that time and still were not. This woman felt disillusioned and hurt by her first experiences in Aurora while her husband fought in the Pacific for the United States. Yet she remained in Aurora with her husband, a member of a well-respected and well-known Mexican family. She worked in a factory for many years and became the mother of five children, all college graduates working in various professions.

The Mexican immigration wave of the 1950s and 1960s was drawn to a city with an expanding "smokestack" industry and plenty of work to offer newcomers. Many came with permits as *braceros* to work as temporary agricultural laborers and stayed. Others worked for the railroad, and many more sought work in the large factories in Aurora.

The C. B. & Q. continued to be a stable source of employment for the new arrivals. In the 1950s, Mexicans working in the railroad's roundhouse on Broadway, located close to downtown Aurora, were again housed in box cars until they eventually rented or bought houses. With the arrival of the English speaking *tejanos* (Texans of Mexican origin), many of them World War II veterans, and the new immigration of Puerto Ricans to Aurora, there was a diversification of the Latino population in the city and a new development of socio-cultural community organizations and businesses. These immigrants no longer needed to travel to Chicago to buy Mexican foods. The first grocery owned by a Mexican, Casa Blanca, was established in the 1950s.

Immigrants in the second wave were likely to have moved to Aurora from Texas. Some had parents who migrated to the United States and returned to Mexico, crossing the border with some frequency. Joseph García was born in Austin, Texas, in 1913, the grandson of land-owning Spaniards who had immigrated to Mexico in the 1800s, and the son of an immigrant from Zacatecas, Mexico, who came to the United States during the years of the Mexican Revolution. When García was seven, his father, a railroad worker, returned to Mexico. With his savings he bought land in Durango and successfully ran a dairy ranch. García attended grade school in Mexico. Inspired and guided by one of his

teachers, he gained a life long interest in learning. At eighteen, he came back to the United States where he worked intermittently. In the 1940s he began working for the Texas Pacific Railroad. He eventually settled in Aurora in 1953 and worked at a manufacturing plant. He married his wife, Otilia, in Mexico. They had ten children, all of whom attended Catholic schools.(V)

During the 1950s and 1960s, Otilia García worked sporadically in Aurora factories where she joined a growing workforce of Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican and Mexicans. She worked the day shift, and her husband worked the second shift. When she worked at a restaurant in a neighboring town, she took a bus to work and returned by 3:00 P.M. because her husband started to work at 3:30. She said,

> My husband didn't want me to work. He said a woman's place was in the home. I knew it was difficult for him to raise so many children so sometimes I would work for only six months which would often stretch to an extra three more months, until he said, "that's it, that's enough!" (V)

The problem seemed to be that García found it very taxing, and probably unsuitable, to take care of their large number of young children while his wife worked outside the home. Therefore, when she discovered that her husband's idea of feeding the children consisted of giving them breakfast cereal, she quit her job. On the other hand, she seems to have imposed her will on certain occasions. García gave up his much loved motorcycle at her request: "My wife told me one day, 'You have a family and you have me and the children. I want you to sell the motorcycle because it's not safe.' She put her foot down and I sold the motorcycle."(V)

Aurelia Alvarez, like García, had parents who immigrated to the U.S. in 1916 during the Mexican Revolution. Her parents told her the story of her father, a seventeen-year-old soldier in the Revolution who stole the girl he fell in love with and brought her to a new country. Alvarez tells the tale:

> In Mexico [in the rural areas] they had these big wells and there was one in that area that was dry. So my grandfather hid my mother down in there because the soldiers would come around and they didn't have any respect for anything. It was wartime. There was no law. They would just do whatever they wanted to do. I guess what happened was that my father found out that she was down in there

> . . . and got her out. Since he was a soldier, he took her with him. . . . He left the war behind and took her and came up here. . . . She didn't really have any choice. He made it clear that he liked her and everything, but she really didn't know what was going on. She was only about fourteen or fifteen years old. She was afraid. . . .(VI)

The couple settled in Illinois and did not return to Mexico until after their first child was born. There, the paternal grandfather helped them marry in the church to legalize the status of their children.

Alvarez's father found a job in Waukegan, Illinois, worked hard, saved his money, and returned to San Luis Potosí, Mexico, to buy land and cattle. As a livestock rancher he did very well financially, but he continued to cross the border to work in Waukegan and make the extra cash he needed, presumably for his business.(VI)

Born in Mexico, Alvarez, like her mother, was married at fifteen and had her first daughter when she was sixteen. She attended school to the sixth grade and wanted to continue. However, secondary school required her to move to a neighboring town where the school was located, and "my mother didn't like the idea. A woman wasn't supposed to do this. My mother said 'Never.' That's why I married young," Alvarez commented.(VI)

She was twenty-one and expecting her third daughter when her husband died. It was at that point that she left Mexico for San Benito, in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, because a close relative had assured her she could find a job to support her daughters. To make a living, Alvarez worked as a packer in canning plants, a housekeeper, and primarily in farm labor. Although it was hard work, she liked working in the fields because she had grown up doing it. As a young girl, she handled the livestock on the family ranch. "People would say that I was like a man and that I had a knack for handling the animals," Alvarez recounted. She began to travel north to Illinois in the early spring with the migrant farm workers from the valley, eventually settling in Joliet, Illinois, and ultimately in Aurora in 1959. She bought a house, worked at a factory, and raised her daughters.(VI)

Large numbers of Mexican and *tejano* migrant workers, some of whom are now prominent members of the Latino community, settled in Aurora in the late 1950s and 1960s, adding to the demand for Mexican businesses and social organizations. Other *tejanos*, jobless in Texas, came to Aurora to fill the need for workers in the many manufacturing

plants in the area. Israel Castillo, an ex-Marine from San Benito, was unemployed when he came to Aurora with friends. To his surprise, he found a job at a factory in Aurora the day after he arrived from Texas in 1965. Dozens of companies in need of factory hands employed many Mexicans, men and women, in their plants.(VI)

Castillo and Alvarez became active in the growing Mexican community. By the early 1960s a few families had begun to organize annual celebrations such as *Fiestas Patrias* (Mexican Independence Day) and choose reigning queens for their parades. Castillo was quickly recruited as a member of the Latin American Club at a time when there were only a few dozen members. When the Latin American Club was founded, its hall was used for family social events such as weddings and *quinceañeras* (large "coming out" parties for girls celebrating their fifteenth birthday). Subsequently, the elected officers took over much of the organizing for personal as well as community-wide celebrations. Castillo's own wedding reception and dance, for instance, was held at the Latin American Club. Around the same time, other organizations began to appear: Club Guadalupano, the Puerto Rican Club, L.U.L.A.C. (League of United Latin American Citizens), and the Latin American Democrats. Nevertheless, the Latin American Club has remained the largest social club with nearly fifteen hundred members.(VI)

Although not all Mexicans joined these clubs or became involved in church activities, the second wave of immigrants began to create a well-defined Latino community structure that included the first Mexican immigrants and their descendants, the English-speaking Texans, the Spanish-speaking Mexicans, and the newly arrived Puerto Ricans. As more immigrants arrived, the diversity and fragmentation increased.

The most recent influx of Mexican immigrants, beginning in the late 1960s, is the largest. It is these recent immigrants that have filled Aurora with their presence, the schools with their children, the factories with their workers, and finally, the air with the sounds of Spanish. These newcomers are principally natives of Mexico who, like their predecessors, have heard of work in Aurora from relatives living there.

Unlike the early immigrants, they enter an established and thriving Mexican/Latino community. The newest immigrants form part of a small community within the larger Latino community and seem to be related to or be from the same village as a large number of other Mexicans who have arrived in the last fifteen years. The dozens of small "mom and pop" Mexican grocery stores in East Aurora are in a sense general stores,

where customers greet the owners like old friends and receive the latest news and gossip.

Like their predecessors, many of the men have returned to Mexico to find brides and bring them to the United States. Many of the women working in Aurora factories came as brides brought over by husbands already settled and working in the area. These men, sometimes the sons of braceros, may have come to this country to join their fathers and, like their fathers, traveled back and forth from Mexico to the United States.

Luz García, Teresa Urbina, and Pola Soto, assembly line workers at an electronics company in Aurora, arrived in the United States in the 1970s. Luz García was sixteen when she married her husband in Tamazula, Jalisco, and went to Aurora to be with him. Her husband, also a native of Jalisco, lived and worked in Aurora for several years before he married. After settling in Aurora to join his brother, he left his brother's home to live with his factory supervisor's family. This family informally "adopted" the sixteen-year-old, sent him to school where he became proficient in English, and subsequently helped him obtain his residency papers.

His wife, Luz, started to work in a factory within a year of her arrival to save money to buy a house. However, when his mother became despondent in Mexico after the death of one of her sons, the Garcías sold their house and belongings and moved to Jalisco to be with her. The move turned out to be temporary, for a year later, after the mother felt better, the García family was back in Aurora. Neither had wanted to stay in Mexico. One of the more salient effects of these moves is that their first child was born in Aurora, their second one in Mexico, and their new baby was recently born in Aurora.(VII)

Teresa and Jesus Urbina met as children in school in San Julian, Durango. By the time she was thirteen, they were *novios* (sweethearts). Brought up by his grandparents in San Julian, the sixteen-year-old Jesus traveled to Aurora in 1976 after his mother established U.S. residency and was able to send for him. Two years later, Teresa went to Chicago where her uncles and older sister lived. She observed:

> My family lived in Chicago, and they would invite me to visit them. [My parents] never wanted to let me because I was very young, and my uncle always wanted me to baby-sit for him. But they would never let me stay [in Chicago] because my mother always said that there is no place like home, that nowhere would I be treated as I was at home where I had everything. . . . But I got my way.(VII)

Once in Chicago the fifteen-year-old started to work in a factory (she looked older) and began to send her parents five hundred dollars a month. "I didn't save for me and didn't dress well. I only bought the essentials. I'd send them money to buy land, tractors, machinery, trucks, furniture for the house, and everything. That's how I helped my parents," she added.(VII) Jesus had a good job and wanted them to get married as soon as possible, but she kept postponing it because she was too young. She wanted to learn English and went to school to become fluent. Jesus, disdainful of English classes, became language proficient on his own. In addition to reading and writing English, he speaks it with hardly a trace of an accent. Teresa married him when she was eighteen and began saving money for their own needs: a car, a house, and furniture of their own.(VII) Still in their twenties, this couple has recently bought a second home located in a new, middle-class subdivision. This house is spacious, well furnished with elegant living room furniture, and a more comfortable family room in the nicely finished basement. Since the couple works on alternate shifts, she cares for the children during the day, and he watches them in the evening. This arrangement is particularly important for them at the present time since she recently gave birth to their second child. To take care of her new baby, she asked for a change in shift after the end of the twelve-week maternity leave provided at the electronic factory where she works.

Pola Soto also met her husband, José, at a young age in her home town in Durango. In 1962 José Soto migrated to Los Angeles with his father, a bracero with an agricultural work permit. Like many of his compatriots, he returned to his hometown with regularity, in this case to see Pola. When Pola was nineteen, she married José and joined him in California in 1971. The following year they arrived in the Aurora area, where a cousin had found a job for him in a meat packing plant in Melrose Park, a Chicago suburb. Pola also found a job in a factory. After twelve years of marriage, and two sons, Pola and José separated and eventually divorced. The separation left Pola on her own to support herself and her two sons.(VII) Barely literate in her native language, she finds it difficult to learn English. This has created problems for her. However, the inability to speak English is ameliorated by the changes that have taken place in Aurora. For this latest immigration has found a well-established Spanish-speaking community in Aurora, a decided advantage for the newcomers. But it has also proven to be a double edged sword for those who are less likely to try to learn English.

The three women, like many other Mexican women, have worked in factories from the time they arrived in the United States. For most married couples the double income is the only way to live in comfortable circumstances, to save money, and buy their own homes. Also, two incomes are a hedge against the unexpected factory layoff of one of the wage earners. This is often a likely prospect for these workers. Thus, they can still count on one income.

When Luz García, Pola Soto and Teresa and Jesus Urbina were asked about the notion that traditional Mexican men are opposed to their wives working outside the home, they responded with a chuckle that customs change with the crossing of the Rio Grande. Jesus added that he does not like Teresa not to work. They also agreed that certain customs change while others remain because it is to their advantage and convenience. Luz García observed that the reason women had jobs outside the home was that Mexicans like to save their money.(VII)

The women in this last wave are representative of many of the Mexicans who have immigrated to Aurora during the last twenty years. They came to the United States without tourist visas or residency permits. Many crossed the border and evaded the border guards, others came as tourists and stayed. Pola Soto recalls crossing the a border station checkpoint in 1971 while the guard was having lunch. When he asked her where she was going, she answered, "shopping," and he gave her the go ahead sign.(VII) In many cases the immigrants received residency papers through their husbands or relatives, but some remained undocumented, afraid they would be caught and sent back.

Although viewed negatively by many of the Anglo Aurorans, recent Mexican immigrants, legal or not, have contributed to the area's labor pool. Hired by businesses unwilling to pay more than minimum wages, they often work at jobs other people will not tolerate. Often unemployed during periods of economic recession, many Mexicans have taken whatever job was available to them. The undocumented have frequently suffered unfair treatment in the work-place as unscrupulous owners or supervisors have taken advantage of the illegal status of the workers and their lack of language skills.

In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) that authorized the legalization of those residing in the United States for a predetermined number of years and tightened controls of employment of illegal workers. Not surprisingly, IRCA facilitated the legal residency of hundreds of Mexicans with jobs in the Aurora area.

The IRCA law is only the latest means of limiting the migration of Mexicans to the United States. The pendulum has swung back and forth depending on this country's need for cheap labor, but immigration has continued regardless of the direction of the swing.

The accounts of the Mexican immigrants interviewed show that during sixty years of migration to Aurora their goal has remained the same: to find work and improve their living conditions. However, unlike other immigrants whose homeland lay across the sea or a continent away, Mexicans have been able to maintain close links with their friends, families, and villages. Even the second and third generations of Aurora's Mexican population retain ties to Mexico.

Mexicans in Aurora currently constitute 15,000 to 17,000 out of approximately 25,000 Latinos in a city of 97,000, and are one of the largest ethnic groups in the area. Although the majority live in the near East Side, a fact easily demonstrated by a forty-five percent Latino student population in the East School District, they have spread throughout the city.

The strong and visible presence of Mexicans in Aurora has had an impact on the community at large. The large number of darker skinned people has the tendency to become threatening to many Anglo Americans who have little knowledge of, and show even less tolerance for Mexicans. Prejudice and unfounded stereotypes contribute to the negative images of Mexicans that continue to persist in the minds of many Anglo American residents. Poverty, laziness, drunkenness, crime, and gang activity are characteristics often associated with the whole Latino population. This overshadows the many positive aspects of the Mexican people and culture.

Serious problems, however, plague the Latino community. These include high drop-out rates and the current prevalence of gangs and violence in the densely populated East Side, where most of the Latinos live. The trend toward gang violence and drug-dealing started in the early 1980s and shows no sign of abatement. Nevertheless, the Latino community in Aurora is making advances. A hard working, thrifty people, they buy their own houses as soon as they can, make plans to start businesses, encourage their children to finish their schooling, and speak with pride of the few who are attending college.

A young group of second-generation Mexican American professionals is becoming involved politically and starting to wrest the leadership away from the immigrants that arrived in the 1950s. The older *caciques*

(political leaders) were never able to have any direct influence in City Hall. The new, more politically aware group, works within the inner circles of city government exerting a power that is beginning to be visible.

Unfortunately, the very heterogeneous nature of the Aurora Latino community—English-speaking Mexican Americans, assimilated descendants of the first Mexican immigrants, the growing number of middle-class professionals, Spanish-speaking immigrants from rural Mexico, Puerto Ricans—results in a lack of cohesiveness that has prevented the community from becoming a strong political force. Additionally, the high number of the foreign-born Latinos has meant fewer registered voters.

In very recent years, nevertheless, there have been more Latino appointed officials in City Hall and on city-wide commissions. For example, after a city council seat was vacated by an alderman, the mayor appointed a Puerto Rican woman long active in the Hispanic community, and a young Mexican American is Assistant to the Mayor. Also, the congressman from the district maintains a Spanish-speaking staff person in Aurora. More importantly, the remapping of the city wards with two new wards, one in an area of high Latino density gives new hope for the election of Hispanics from these neighborhoods.

The Mexican community in Aurora has grown from approximately fifty families of railroad workers in the 1920s to nearly 15,000 residents as the decade of the 1990s begins. The Mexican immigrant workers are on the verge of becoming a political and economic force that can have an effect on the future of the city in the next century.

APPENDIX

Now in their middle sixties, three of the men interviewed, Ruben Frausto, Frank Barajas, and Ralph Cruz, grew up in the railroad camp in Aurora in the 1920s. Their stories are similar although their perspective and memory of the circumstances they lived reflect personal experience and vary accordingly. All three joined the armed forces at the onset of World War II, fought overseas, and are very proud of serving their country.

Barajas, who joined the army before finishing high school, returned from the war to find work in Aurora at the Austin-Western Road Machinery Company, the second largest plant in Aurora and located close to the old railroad reclamation plant. Relatives helped him find a

job in the factory where he worked his way up to supervisor, remaining there until he retired. Barajas' father, one of the first Mexican immigrants moving to Aurora to work for the railroad, is nearly one hundred years old and still lives by himself in the house he bought for his family in the 1930s.

Frausto graduated from high school before going to war and also came back to Aurora to settle down. He married an Anglo, had seven children, and still serves in the Air Force Reserve. His father was well known in the railroad box-car community for his intelligence, wide-ranging knowledge, and the large English dictionary he used as a daily reference to his new language.

Cruz came home after the war, and attended more than one university, including the University of Chicago. Although he did not attain a baccalaureate degree, his extensive studies in math and engineering have enabled him to work in research and development as an engineer. His comfortable home in Elmhurst, a Chicago suburb, is concomitant to his rise in social and professional status. His father, a leader in the railroad camp, also served as a contractor for seasonal agricultural Mexican labor at the local and regional produce farms.

A fourth informant, Joe Hernandez, grew up in the same era but not in the railroad camp. Hernandez, who has been a faculty member of the art department at Waubonsee Community College for many years, returned to school as an adult to gain undergraduate and graduate degrees. A respected and well-known member of the Latino community in Aurora, he serves on city-wide committees.

Julia Perez Padilla, another box car child, did not marry until she was twenty-eight because her "sickly" mother kept her single and at home with threats that "she would die" if Julia married. This strong willed mother ruled her household with a hard hand while her husband worked at the railroad yards. Perez Padilla had five children, all of whom attended parochial schools and none of whom speak Spanish.

Only one of the first immigrants, Socorro Leon, was willing to be interviewed. Leon arrived in Texas with her parents as a young child but went back to Mexico in 1918 after her mother's death. Although she lived very comfortably in Mexico on the income her brother in Texas sent his family, she returned to Texas at his invitation. At seventeen, she married and left with her husband to avoid her uncle's strong disapproval of her early marriage. The young couple traveled to Aurora after

her husband's brother advised them of job opportunities on the railroad yard. Her husband found work at the C. B. & Q., where he remained from 1925 to 1972 when he retired.

REFERENCES

Oral History Interviews

I Frank Barajas, Ruben Frausto, and Socorro Leon. Personal Interview. 14 Nov. 1987.

II Frank Barajas, MaryAnn and Ruben Frausto, and Joe Hernandez. Personal Interview. 20 Nov. 1987.

III Socorro Leon. Personal Interview. 18 Jan. 1988.

IV Julia and Ralph Cruz. Personal Interview. 26 Mar. 1988.

V Otilia and Joseph Garcia. Personal Interview. 8 Aug. 1988.

VI Aurelia Alvarez and Israel Castillo. Personal Interview. 16 Aug. 1988.

VII Luz Garcia, Apolonia Soto, and Teresa and Jesus Urbina. Personal Interview. 16 Aug. 1988.

NOTES

[1] Charles S. Battle, editor, *Centennial Historical and Biographical Record of Aurora, Illinois for 100 Years, 1834 -1937, and of the C. B. & Q. Railroad for 86 Years, 1985-1937.* (This commemorative volume has no publication date or publishing house. It seems to have been published in the year of the centennial, 1937, and sponsored by the many Aurora companies and businesses that are featured in the book), 5, 6.

[2] Battle, 19, 22.

[3] Battle, 23, 24, 174.

[4] Battle, 175, 188.

[5] As noted in the introduction, references to the oral history interviews are indicated in the text with Roman numerals in the sequence they occurred. See appendix for a narrative on individuals interviewed.

[6] Julia Perez Padilla. Personal interview. 18 July 1987.

[7] The group of families, Cruz, Hernandez, Cansino, Nila, Paredones, Perez, Gonzales, Frausto, Torres, Barajas, Leon, Guzman, Morales, Rocha, Rangel, Gutierrez, Navarro, Acosta, Cervantes, Orta, Vargas, and Ochoa were among the first to immigrate to Aurora and showed much concern for each other.

[8] Aurora Public Schools, District 131, *Report of Board of Education,* 1915, 53.

[9] *Report of Board of Education,* 1916.

[10] *Report of Board of Education,* 1925.

[11] *Report of Board of Education,* 1926, 50.

[12] *Report of Board of Education,* 1926, 51, 52.

[13] *Report of Board of Education,* 1927, 61.

[14] *Report of Board of Education,* 1927, 61.

[15] *Report of Board of Education,* 1928, 48.

[16] *Report of Board of Education,* 1928, 48.

[17] *Report of Board of Education,* 1932, 14.

[18] E.V. Telephone interview. 10 August 1987.