

A HISTORY OF MEXICAN IMMIGRATION IN SAINT LOUIS



Globe Democrat archival photo of members of the Mexican Benefit Society in St. Louis in 1934.

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Small numbers of immigrants from Mexico were arriving in St. Louis as early as the late 19th Century, but it wasn't until the 1910s that the first major wave of Mexican immigration began. These early arrivals, whose number peaked in the late 1920s, were pushed out of Mexico because of war, and economic instability.

In this period, St. Louis often served as a vital entry point for Mexican immigrants into the larger Midwestern region with employers in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and St. Paul using it as an important distribution center for Mexican labor. For Mexicans looking for work and new opportunity in the Midwest, St. Louis was often a gateway, not to the West as it has traditionally been described, but to the East.

By 1927, the Mexican population living in the region was likely between 5000 and 7000 people. Unfortunately, the Great Depression caused an exodus of Mexicans from the region as discrimination, poverty, and a national program of repatriation diminished the population by more than half.

In 1943, dealing with a wartime labor shortage the Federal government established the "Bracero" Guest Worker Program. This program, which operated until 1964, brought thousands of Mexican immigrants to the area to work in agriculture in the towns of Chesterfield, Wildwood, and Manchester. Some of these guest workers remained after the end of their contracts making St. Louis their new home. They supplemented a Mexican population in the region already beginning to rebound from the Great Depression.

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As the Mexican population put down deeper roots in St. Louis, Mexican culture became much more visible. Clubs, musical groups, and restaurants began to be established as the Mexican community sought to share their heritage through music, dance, and food.

Sadly in the early 1950s, the community was again set back by a program of mass deportation dubbed "Operation Wetback" which targeted undocumented immigrants. The government estimated that they had rounded up over 1 million people nationwide including some from the St. Louis region.

The growth of the population continued however as Mexican immigrants began to arrive at a never before seen rate in the second half of the 20th Century and into the early 21st Century.

Today, Mexicans represent the largest portion of the region's foreign born population. This still growing community has become a vital part of the region, establishing businesses at a superior rate, as well as continuing to broaden the cultural fabric of St. Louis and surrounding areas.

See reverse side for timeline.

Mexican immigrants visiting forest park in the early 20th century. Photo Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Missouri.

A TIMELINE OF MEXICAN IMMIGRATION IN SAINT LOUIS



St. Louis had the largest trading relationship with Mexico of any city in the nation. Pictured above is the Mexican Spanish American Exchange in 1880s on 8th and Olive streets in St. Louis. Photo Courtesy of the Missouri History Museum.

1880

The Benito Juarez Society is established as a cultural organization for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Their stated goal is to help displace destructive stereotypes that existed about Mexican people.

1936



The first of thousands of Mexican migrant workers arrive at Hellwig's Farm in the Chesterfield Valley. These workers some as young as 9 years old worked over 12 hours a day. Photo Courtesy of the University of California Digital Archives.

Ca. 1940

1982



The St. Louis Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is established.

St. Louis University research projects the Hispanic population will reach 195,767 in the St. Louis Metro Area by this time.

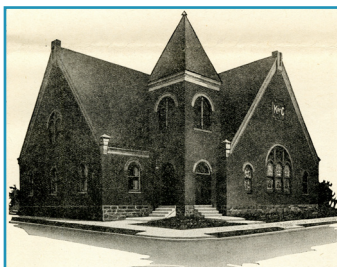
2030

1905

Several exiled members of Mexican Liberal Party and publishers of a radical newspaper called "Regeneration" come to St. Louis. They'd cause controversy during their stay, but would help inspire the Mexican Revolution.

1915

Our Lady of Covadonga, a Spanish language parish is established in Carondelet to serve newly arriving Spanish and Mexican Immigrants. Photo Courtesy of the St. Louis Archdiocese.



1927

10,000 Mexican migrants pass through St. Louis as the first major wave to the Midwest peaked.

1956

El Sarape, one of St. Louis's earliest Mexican Restaurant's is established near St. Louis University. Photo Courtesy of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.



2010

U.S. Census St. Louis Metro Area Hispanic Population reaches 75,000. Fastest growing minority population.



Cinco de Mayo celebration on Cherokee Street in May 2010. Credit: Juan Montaña.