Mexican Mercantile Exchange—8th and Olive Streets. St. Louis faced the daunting task of rebuilding physically, socially, and economically in the years following the Civil War. A number of civic and economic leaders in St. Louis believed that the answer to economic recovery lay in trade with our southern neighbors in Mexico and Central America. The timing for this was right, as the Mexican regime of Porfirio Diaz was committed to a program of "modernization" that actively encouraged investment from the United States. The goal of trade in America was led by a man named John F. Cahill, who ran a mercantile drug business and had lived and worked in Cuba and Mexico. Cahill established a bilingual newspaper in St. Louis and served as the city's first Mexican Consul.[A] In 1883, he established a Mexican and Spanish American Mercantile Exchange. The exchange building was three stories tall and contained the offices of the exchange itself as well as a Spanish printing office.[B] The exchange, along with the city's other efforts, were hugely successful, making St. Louis the leader in commerce with Mexico in the late nineteenth century with $7.5 million in trade.[C] *(Image: Missouri Historical Society)*

A GATEWAY TO THE EAST:

An Exploration of St. Louis' Mexican History Through the Built Environment

by **DANIEL GONZALES**

In the early twentieth century, Mexican immigrants were attracted to the industrial Midwest as it provided ample job opportunities and lacked competition from previous generations of Mexican immigrants. Since that time, the population of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Midwest has continued to grow and diversify. Unfortunately, the long history of Mexican people in the Midwest has been tragically understudied.[1]

This is particularly apparent in the St. Louis region. Contributing to this lack of attention may be United States Census records, which show only a small presence of Mexicans in the Gateway City and surrounding areas. Census reporting, however, seems to have undervalued the population's size and the significance of Mexican immigration to the region.[2] Surveys done by community organizations, regional institutions, and mutual aid societies show that the population in the early twentieth century, as Mexicans began to enter the Midwest in significant numbers, was much larger than reported.[3]

"Mexico has been represented for several years among the students of Washington University, St. Louis University, and Christian Brothers' College . . . every time a young Mexican returns home he sends back two or three others to take his place in the St. Louis school."

***St. Louis Republic*, 1893**

Evidence also shows that Mexicans in St. Louis were distinct from other regional populations in several key ways, such as their pattern of settlement socio-economic makeup. In addition, St. Louis Mexicans contributed significantly to the region's economic development by facilitating the development of strong trading ties with their country of origin. Lastly, the city often served as a vital entry point for Mexican immigrants into the larger region as employers in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and St. Paul used it as a distribution center for Mexican labor.[4] 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.

The first major wave of Mexican immigration to St. Louis began around 1910, but small numbers of Mexicans were living in St. Louis in the nineteenth century, as a robust trading relationship developed between the two regions.[5] That trade, which amounted to more than $7 million annually by the 1890s, was an important part of the St. Louis region's economic growth in the post–Civil War period.[6] The trade was driven by a number of institutions in St. Louis, including a Spanish-language newspaper called *El Comercio del Valle* established in 1876, the Mexican Consulate established in 1878, and the Mexican Mercantile Exchange established in 1883. All of these institutions were spearheaded by John F. Cahill. A native of Virginia, Cahill had moved to Cuba in 1864, where he established a retail drug business. He left Cuba around 1871 after his property was confiscated in the wake of a rebellion against Spanish rule of the island. Arriving in St. Louis the following year, he opened a drug store at 6th and Chestnut streets and became involved in local commercial networks.[7]

The trade that Cahill fostered helped bring an increasing, if still modest, number of Mexican immigrants to the St. Louis region. It is estimated that there were roughly 100 Mexicans living in St. Louis in 1893. In that same year, the *St. Louis Republic* reported that "Mexico has been represented for

Boxcar Community in North St. Louis. In the neighborhood of Baden on the extreme northern edge of St. Louis, a group of Mexican immigrants established a community built out of boxcars and other makeshift structures. The community spread out along the railroad line that ran parallel to the Mississippi River.[D] The families living there received mail through a nearby store and used a central fire hydrant as their water source.[E] The Zuñigas, Agustin and Jesus, were one family living in this community. Their son, Agustin Jr., remembers it as a happy time. He said his family struggled financially, but explained, "when you are a poor family you don't know any different. You are just happy to have a roof over your head, and your family and friends."[F] *(Image: Missouri Historical Society)*

El Comercio Del Valle.

Dedicado a Los Intereses Comerciales, Industriales y Manufactureros del Valle Misisipi.

Vol. 1. No 1. ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, E. U. A., OCTOBRE 1876. Precio, 10 Centavos.

TO OUR PATRONS AND THE PUBLIC IN

John F. Cahill / *El Comercio Del Valle.* John F. Cahill moved to St. Louis from Cuba in 1871, and published *El Comercio Del Valle* (Commerce of the Valley) starting about five years later until 1890. He distributed his paper, published in both Spanish and English, both locally and in Mexico. In St. Louis, *La Revista Mexicana* (The Mexican Magazine) competed with the paper, and *La Union de America* (The Union of America) appeared in the 1888 City Directory. Note the engraving of the St. Louis and Illinois (or Eads) Bridge on the masthead—a symbol of progress in St. Louis in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. *(Images: Missouri Historical Society)*

Several of the early Mexican residents in the St. Louis region were members of the Mexican Liberal Party. These men were radical dissidents who opposed President Porfirio Diaz, the dictator of Mexico.

Our Lady of Covadonga–7100 Virginia Avenue. Beginning in 1912, a "Spanish Mission" was established responding to the influx of Spanish immigrants as well as refugees from Mexico after the Mexican Revolution.[G] By 1915, the "Spanish Mission" had become well enough established to acquire its own building at the intersection of Virginia and Blow.[H] The building had originally been constructed around 1890 for use by the Methodist Church of Carondelet.[I] Once occupied by the "Spanish Mission," it became known as Our Lady of Covadonga, in honor of a legend attributing the Spanish defeat of Muslim invaders in 722 at the Battle of Covadonga to the Virgin Mary. The first priests of the congregation were Father Jose Pico Jover and Father Jesus Ceja. Ordained in Mexico, both men arrived in St. Louis in 1914.[J] The parish was roughly 30 percent Mexican, with most remaining congregants coming from the neighboring Spanish colony.[K] The church closed in 1920, and the building was purchased by the Rosati Council of the Knights of Columbus as a Club House. At the urging of community members, the Rosati Council opened the building to be used as a "Spanish Mission" once again. This time the church continued until 1932. During that time there were a total of 183 baptisms and 43 weddings. Each year there were roughly 2,000 communions and confessions.[L] *(Image: Jeffrey Smith)*

several years among the students of Washington University, St. Louis University, and Christian Brothers' College . . . every time a young Mexican returns home he sends back two or three others to take his place in the St. Louis school."[8] The influx of students was certainly tied to trade, but it also appears to have been fostered by prominent Mexican citizens in St. Louis. Chief among them was Isabel Sandoval, the daughter of Clito and Amelia Sandoval. The Sandovals were a wealthy family that had taken up residence in St. Louis around 1890. Isabel was successful in using her family's business and political connections in Mexico to develop a reputation in St. Louis. The growing number of aristocratic Mexicans living and connected through trade to St. Louis continued to grow into the twentieth century.[9] The high level of wealth that was present among the earliest immigrants to St. Louis sets it apart from the foundational populations in other midwestern cities like Chicago and Detroit, whose earliest Mexican immigrants came as economic migrants in the decades following the Mexican Revolution.[10]

Several of the early Mexican residents in the St. Louis region were members of the Mexican Liberal Party. These men were radical dissidents who opposed President Porfirio Diaz, the dictator of Mexico. The group, which gained a great deal of attention in the local and national press, were dubbed the "St. Louis Junta."[11] The ideas they promoted would inspire leaders like Francisco Madero, who would eventually lead the revolution that would overthrow the Diaz regime, beginning the Mexican Revolution.[12]

When the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, the trade that had developed between St. Louis and Mexico flatlined. The number of Mexicans coming to the city only accelerated, however. This attraction of refugees led newspapers from North Carolina to Oregon to report in 1913 that "St. Louis is today being called the chief exile for wealthy Mexicans. . . ."[13] These early migrants helped establish a Spanish-language mission, called Our Lady of Covadonga, in the Carondelet area of South St. Louis.[14]

By the late 1910s and into the 1920s, immigration from Mexico accelerated as refugees were joined by economic migrants. These immigrants were increasingly attracted to the industrial Midwest as World War I and changes to immigration law in 1917 and 1924 led to a labor shortage in the region.[15]

During this period St. Louis, perhaps because of its existing Mexican community or its position along the rail line, became an important distribution center for Mexican workers to other areas of the Midwest and beyond.[16] The distribution of workers out of St. Louis was managed by a handful of employment agencies. The two largest seem to have been the Griswold Employment Agency and the Model Employment (sometimes Labor) Agency, both located around Market Street between 8th and 11th. In 1927, the Model Employment Agency alone recruited ten thousand Mexican laborers to and through St. Louis. These agencies would advertise for and recruit workers from Texas and northern Mexico and bring them to St. Louis aboard trains and later on busses.[17]

In the 1910s and 1920s, a significant Mexican community developed just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. One of the largest concentrations of Mexican immigrants could be found in the Lincoln Place neighborhood of Granite City, Illinois. Here, many Mexican people found work with the nearby steel mill. In 1926, the Mexican community in Granite City organized the **Mexican Honorary Commission**, a mutual aid and heritage society. The organization provided aid to destitute members of the community and organized a number of cultural events, including fiestas that were often attended by local residents, both Mexican and not.[M] Eventually, the organization was able to purchase a building at 1801 Spruce St., which had previously served as the Hungarian Home, a center for immigrants from Hungary. The organization continues to operate from that location today. *(Image: Jeffrey Smith)*

While for many Mexican immigrants St. Louis was only a temporary stop on the way to their intended destination, by the 1910s and 1920s the permanent population of Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the region began to grow significantly.[18]

Unlike in other Midwestern enclaves, St. Louis Mexicans never developed a significant population center. Instead, they settled in a disparate pattern across the region with most of the population in St. Louis City and a few communities in the Metro East and St. Louis County. This settlement was possible because of the availability of affordable housing near places of employment, and motivated by the reality that immigrants were attracted to St. Louis to work in a number of different types of employment, not concentrated in just one.[19]

It is difficult to accurately estimate how large the Mexican community grew in this period. Census records are unreliable, and other surveys vary widely. For example, estimates from the Catholic Church and the International Institute, who surveyed only the City of St. Louis, put the numbers around 2,000–3,000.[20] However, the *Globe-Democrat* reported in 1934 that the population in the 1920s had been as large as 15,000 across the region.[21]

Unfortunately, as the influx of Mexicans to St. Louis reached its zenith, the Great Depression decimated the nation's economy. Mexican immigrants were hit particularly hard. In St. Louis, Mexicans faced discrimination in hiring and reported harassment by police.[22] Severo Guerrero explained his experience: "We had an awful time with the citizenry and also with the cops. . . . Wherever the cops saw two or three Mexicans together he came in here and he didn't come talking like they do now saying 'will you do this sir?' They came in there with [night] sticks poking you in the stomach, the ribs, anywhere with big authority. Abusing their authority."[23] Additionally, the Mexican Consulate in St. Louis explained in a 1932 report, "things are worse this year than last, and jobs are hard to find. Plus the employers want to hire Americans and Europeans before Mexicans. . . . taking into consideration only men work, it can be calculated that 40–50% are unemployed."[24] As a result of these realities, many took the opportunity to repatriate to Mexico, a move encouraged by government policies.[25] The community did not begin to rebuild until after World War II.

In 1943, dealing with a wartime labor shortage, the federal government established the "Bracero" Guest Worker Program.[26] This program, which operated until 1964, brought significant numbers of Mexican immigrants to the area to work in agriculture in the west St. Louis

In 1943, dealing with a wartime labor shortage, the federal government established the "Bracero" Guest Worker Program.

Mexican workers in the Midwest were often attracted by the region's booming industrial sector.[N] In St. Louis Mexican workers found opportunities with a number of employers. In a study done on St. Louis City's Mexican community by the International Institute in 1929, only one company is mentioned by name as a large employer of Mexican workers. That company, **American Car and Foundry,** seen in these two views, was a manufacturer of streetcars.[O] One oral tradition about early Mexican immigrants to St. Louis explains that for many the words "American Car" were among the first they learned in the English language.[P] *(Images: Missouri Historical Society)*

Several Mexican musicians developed a following in St. Louis during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. One of them was the Santa Cruz Orchestra, a Mexican jam band made up of brothers from the Santa Cruz family. According to one of the members, Enrique (Henry) Santa Cruz, one of the primary venues for Mexican music was the Ratskeller of the **German House.** He reported that he played there for eight-nine years in the 1950s and 1960s.[Q] Additionally, for a portion of the period, a Mexican restaurant and bar operated in the basement of the venue.[R]
(Image: Missouri Historical Society)

As Mexican immigrants continued to arrive, earlier waves of Mexican immigrants were putting down deeper roots, and a generation of St. Louis-born Mexican Americans began to develop.

communities of Chesterfield, Manchester, and Centaur (now part of Wildwood).[27] Employers including Hellwig Brothers and Raumbach Farms employed not only Bracero guest workers, but also Mexican American migrant workers. Estollio Abella worked for Hellwig's Farm for more than a decade. He began when he was nine years old, putting in 12–14 hours a day. Estollio remembered his experience, saying, "the housing was kind of poor, the Mexicans didn't want to stay there all year. I had seen how the people looked when they reached 50 years old, over worked, run down, and spent."[28] Despite these challenges, some found better opportunities and made St. Louis and other areas of the Midwest their permanent home. Abella found opportunities in Indiana and Ohio.[29]

As Mexican immigrants continued to arrive, earlier waves of Mexican immigrants were putting down deeper roots, and a generation of St. Louis–born Mexican Americans began to develop. Mexican culture became much more visible to the broader community at this time. Clubs, musical groups, and restaurants began to be established as the Mexican community sought to share their heritage through music, dance, and food.[30]

In the early 1950s, the community was again set back by a program of mass deportation dubbed "Operation Wetback." The program targeted undocumented immigrants, but it led to the expulsion of a large number of legal residents and citizens.[31] The government estimated that they had rounded up more than a million people nationwide, including some from the St. Louis region.[32]

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.[33] This still-growing community has become a vital part of the area, establishing businesses and continuing to broaden the cultural fabric of St. Louis and surrounding areas.

Despite the more than 100-year history of Mexicans in the region, identifying historic sites for the community in the built environment is challenging. One reason is the way that early Mexican immigrants settled. As discussed above, Mexicans in St. Louis did not concentrate on a particular neighborhood; instead, they found affordable housing near their places of work. Mexican communities also were often displaced, making it hard to establish long-lasting institutions.

Perhaps because of these challenges, history and historic preservation advocates have not previously sought to identify and commemorate sites of relevance to Mexicans and Mexican Americans in St. Louis. While understandable, this is certainly not satisfactory as Latinos, with Mexicans as the majority, continue to grow as a percentage of the region's population.

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