

# Finding Latin Roots: Hispanic Heritage in Kansas City



*Melville School/Major Hudson Annex (demolished), 516 Shawnee Road., unknown date and photographer.*

The 1951 Kansas River Flood devastated communities throughout Kansas. Major cities along the Kaw, including Manhattan, Topeka, Lawrence and Kansas City, suffered extensive damage when the River topped levees and overran neighborhoods nestled in its oxbows and valleys.

By Daniel Serda, Ph.D.

While the legend of the 1951 Flood is a staple of local and regional history, its impact on racial and ethnic minorities has not been well documented. In the case of the Mexican Americans living in the Argentine and Armourdale neighborhoods of Kansas City, Kansas, the flood represented personal tragedy, but also helped bring to a close a dark chapter of publically-mandated school segregation that is largely absent from the historical record.

This was among the key discoveries of a recent survey of Hispanic-American Historic Places undertaken with the support of a Historic Preservation Fund grant from the Kansas Historical Society. In 2010 a University of Kansas

professor and undergraduate student launched a historic resources survey of places, structures, and sites of significance to the Mexican American experience in Kansas City. Within the study's identified boundaries, which included three distinct urban neighborhoods, the study sought out structures and sites that might be eligible for inclusion on the local, state and National Registers of Historic Places, or that might serve as contributing structures for a thematic register nomination.

A historic resources survey involves documenting both the physical features and unique history of sites and buildings. It is the first formal step in determining a

building's historic significance, and its eligibility to be included on a local historic registry, or the National Register of Historic Places, which is administered by the National Park Service. A historic resources survey is also an important step in raising awareness of the unique role such places and buildings have played in shaping community history. A survey also represents the first step toward making the buildings eligible for preservation funding, such as grants or tax credits to aid in their repair or rehabilitation.

### Places of Absence

The Hispanic community is the largest and most rapidly growing minority group within the United States. While the continued influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico and Central America continues to stoke debates on federal immigration policy, Hispanic influence in the Midwest dates to the earliest periods of Spain's colonial history in the Americas. Despite this longstanding presence, however, Latinos are not actively engaged in the formal preservation movement, and the history of Latino communities is poorly represented in the pantheon of sites and structures surveyed and designated by historic surveys and local, state or national registers of historic places.

Nationally, the Hispanic American community is represented in preservation primarily through the recognition of Spanish colonial sites, the best examples of which are recognized not only for their historical significance, but also for their distinction as distinguished examples of Spanish colonial architecture. Most of these sites are located in the Southwest, which has a lasting and obvious symbolic and cultural association with Hispanic presence in the Americas.

At the 2009 National Preservation Conference, the National Trust for Historic Preservation launched a Latino/Hispanic American Historic Places Initiative to broaden the reach, relevance and impact of the national preservation movement to Latino communities throughout the United States. The Kansas City survey project was intended to draw national attention to the rich heritage and contributions of distinct Hispanic communities in the urban

Midwest. Presentation of the survey's results played a key role in a 2011 National Trust forum (dubbed a *conversación*, the Spanish word for conversation or convening) that drew together nearly 60 regional and community leaders to explore the potential contribution and missing links in preserving sites related to the history of the local Hispanic population.

The Kansas City survey also differed from some traditional efforts in a key aspect: local community members were consulted early and throughout the process to provide guidance in helping to identify the kinds of places that are meaningful to Kansas City's Hispanic community. From the outset, the survey team expected that many of these sites and places might not easily fit the traditional criteria for register listing, including their architectural merit and the likelihood that they may have been dramatically altered, if not demolished. Because so few sites related to Hispanic heritage have been surveyed in Kansas, the project offered an opportunity to understand the historical narratives that are meaningful to specific ethnic communities, as well as to evaluate the types of resources that represent this heritage, and challenges that might limit their inclusion in formal preservation efforts.

### Kansas City's Mexican American Heritage

Mexican Americans first immigrated in significant numbers to Kansas during the late 19th and early 20th



*Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church (demolished), 813 St. Paul, circa 1925, unknown photographer.*

centuries. In 1909 regional railroads began to recruit Mexican laborers, leading to the establishment of a large Mexican barrio in the midst of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe yards in Argentine (then an independent city, now a distinct neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas). Around the same time, the Kansas City Southern Railroad drew Mexican workers to its yard near Kansas City, Missouri's West Side neighborhood, and the Frisco Railroad brought Mexican workers to its yards in nearby Rosedale (also now a part of Kansas City).

Recruitment of Mexican workers to the Midwest expanded greatly after World War I, when Congress passed the 1918 Foreign Exclusion Act, which limited European immigration for the first time in U.S. history. In 1910, 55 percent of all track laborers in Kansas City, Kansas, were Mexicans; by 1915, this number had increased to 85 percent, and to more than 90 percent by the late 1920s. Similarly, meatpacking plants in Kansas City, which had heavily relied on Slavic immigrants in the late 19th century, turned their attention to workers from Mexico.

Hundreds of these laborers, who worked primarily as section hands responsible for maintaining tracks, switches, and rolling stock in the railyards, were housed in "campos", or camps, where they were sheltered in railroad box cars. Drawing on the manuscript schedules of the 1920 U.S. Census, the survey identified the largest of such camps adjacent to the Santa Fe freight yards in Argentine. A smaller Santa Fe campo was located in nearby Turner, Kansas, while the Union Pacific Railroad's camps housed Mexican section workers in Edwardsville and Bonner Springs, the site of another campo established by the local cement plant. The census manuscripts suggest that large groups of African American workers also lived near the Mexican settlements in Rosedale and Argentine.

The presence of so many workers and their families living under marginal conditions, literally "on the other side of the tracks", reinforced the stigmas imposed by the majority population on the dark-skinned, Spanish-speaking workers, many of whom were drawn to Kansas City from the interior Mexican states of Michoacán, Jalisco, and Guanajuato. The harsh living conditions, coupled with the outbreak of Spanish Flu in 1918, fueled suspicions and widespread concern among Anglos about the hygiene and morals of the new immigrants. This was a period in which resentment against foreign laborers, including Eastern and Southern Europeans, fueled the rise and national prominence of the Ku Klux Klan, which

established an office on Minnesota Avenue in downtown Kansas City in the early 1920s. (The Klan was publically aligned with the anti-immigrant movement from the late 19th century through World War I, in part on the basis of the Catholic heritage of many of the Slavic "foreigners" deemed suspect by the advent of war.)

Local attitudes and economic realities created an environment of uncertainty around the place of Mexican immigrants in local communities. During an economic recession in 1922, meatpacking plants, railroads and manufacturers furloughed thousands of laborers in Kansas City and other cities around the industrial Midwest. In response, massive repatriation efforts were organized to send displaced workers back to Mexico. In 1920 and 1921 close to 100,000 unemployed Mexican laborers were repatriated from the U.S. to Mexico. In June 1921 the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and a coalition of local charities (including some within the Mexican American community itself) jointly sponsored a Missouri Pacific "day coach" for between 800 and 900 Mexican workers and their families, which left Union Station bound for Wichita and El Paso, where they disembarked and were transferred to a Mexican Railroad train destined for Ciudad Juarez. By the late 1920s, the U.S. government began to restrict Mexican immigration administratively, resulting the eventual expulsion of nearly 65,000 Mexican workers from the U.S. during the Great Depression.

## **Heritage and the Social Fabric of Local Communities**

Preliminary research supporting the survey effort focused primarily on academic studies, including doctoral and master's theses about Kansas City's Mexican American community. Given the tenuous living circumstances and meager wealth of the early immigrants, the survey team was unsure whether any significant structures were likely to have survived the passage of time. Consultations with community leaders did suggest, however, that important civic institutions, such as local churches and schools, would provide a basic framework of sites for the survey process. The team identified four extant churches, along with one destroyed by the 1951 Flood, that were of critical importance to the Mexican American community. Despite their impressive Gothic revival and regional vernacular architecture, all had been overlooked by previous survey efforts.

To supplement this formal research process, the team organized two community meetings, which were held on

Saturday afternoons and advertised through local church bulletins and community newsletters. The forums offered the team an opportunity to explain the basics of preservation to community members, many of whom assumed that their history lacked significance. The forums were an important connection for the team to identify sites and stories, along with local cultural traditions that needed to be commemorated. It was also through the forums that the team learned about two important longstanding annual traditions: a reunion of Mexican Americans who survived the 1951 Flood, and a reunion of former students from a segregated Mexican school.

Based on both formal research and the community meetings, the team focused its efforts on three categories of sites and buildings: civic institutions (two segregated Mexican schools and five Catholic parishes); places of social importance (recreational facilities, including the Argentine Parish House, Pan-American Club and Armourdale Bath House); and entertainment facilities (such as Argentine's Park Theatre). The team also learned through the community meetings about Mexican-owned businesses that existed before 1951 but were wiped out or relocated by the Flood, but were not able to find adequate supporting information in city directories and other sources to adequately document them.

It was through the community outreach process that the team learned about one of the most unique and important social institutions in Argentine, the Eagle's Nest, a local American Legion Post established by Mexican American veterans who were not allowed to join the established local Post after World War II. The story of this site is emblematic of the Hispanic community's arrival as working-class immigrants and emergence as fully-vested citizens in American society.

In March 1921, the Kansas Conference of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church established an outreach mission in the W. Jones Building, a three-story, rustic storefront located in the midst of the railroad campo in Argentine. The Methodist Mexican Mission provided Americanization classes and social services to Mexican workers and their families, including medical and dental care, child care and general welfare assistance. The Mission also served as a practice center for the Kansas City, Missouri, based National Training School of the Missionary Society, whose students helped supplement the Mission's staff and expand its range of services. Educational offerings at the Methodist



*Argentine Parish House (demolished), 1448 S. 27th, Building interior, September 15, 1922, courtesy Wyandotte County Museum.*

Mission included a kindergarten, night school, and church school, and the Mission also hosted children's groups, mother's meetings, and social evenings. Miriam Cheney, a young teacher from who arrived in Argentine to teach night school courses in English, later went on to become the first principal at the Clara Barton School.

When returning Mexican American veterans were denied membership in the local chapter of the American Legion, they sought and were granted a charter for a new Legion Post. Post 213 initially met in several different buildings throughout the Mexican barrio, until September 1953, when the Post purchased the W. Jones Building from the Methodist City Missionary Society. From its earliest beginnings, the Argentine Eagle's Nest served as an important setting for community gatherings and fiestas, and provided Hispanic veterans a place to call their own. The Eagle's Nest continues to function as an active American Legion Post, and is comprised both of aging veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, as well as more recent recruits from Argentine who served in the first Gulf War or more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The property includes a baseball diamond and ball field that were actively used as the site of intramural league play from the foundation of the post through the 1990s.

### **Sites and Stories of National Significance**

The community outreach efforts also helped the team document two school sites associated with an overlooked chapter in Kansas history, the segregation of Mexican and Mexican American students in the decades between the

two World Wars. The story of segregated Mexican schools in Kansas is not only largely absent from national accounts of the Civil Rights movement, but it has been acknowledged primarily in academic research that does little to commemorate the specific places and sites associated with that history. Nonetheless, this heritage has long been a part of local community folk history, as confirmed by several oral history projects consulted by the survey team.

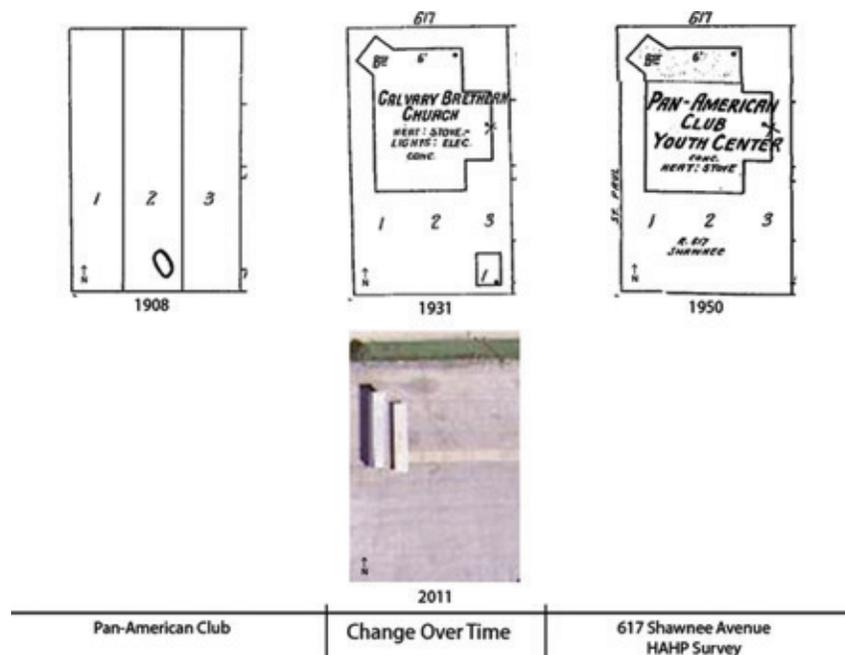
In the fall of 1918, following public concerns about the ongoing influenza epidemic, local residents pressured the Kansas City school district to forbid the children of Mexican laborers from attending local public schools. Instead, the school district confined Mexican American students, many of whom were born in Kansas and thus U.S. citizens, to attending classes in the poorly-ventilated basements of existing buildings. By the early 1920s, Mexican schoolchildren in Kansas City were being taught in extremely large classes (up to 80 students) in the basements of two existing elementary schools, Emerson in Argentine and John J. Ingalls in Armourdale.

According to architectural plans prepared when the building was remodeled in the early 1920s, the “Mexican Room” at Ingalls shared the floor with a coal room and boys and girls toilets. In 1921 the teacher to student ratio in the dank basement reached 1 to 72, prompting a new

wave of concern among Anglo parents about the potential for epidemic disease. The following year, the district constructed a separate three-room annex on the school grounds, and justified the ongoing segregation of Mexican students as part of an “Americanization” program promoted by the city’s chamber of commerce.

In Argentine, after four years of lobbying by local civic leaders and the Emerson and Ingalls PTA chapters, the district built Clara Barton, the first formally segregated Mexican school in Kansas City. Located at 25th and Cheyenne Avenue, Clara Barton sat in the midst of the railroad campo on the north side of the Santa Fe Railway’s Argentine yard. Sited near the foot of the “Old Southern Bridge” that carried Argentine Boulevard across the Kansas River from Armourdale, Clara Barton originally contained three classrooms that housed approximately 125 students, ranging in age from first through eighth grades. The school averaged a 40 to 1 pupil to teacher ratio, and was soon overcrowded. Two additional classrooms were later added to the building.

The segregation of Mexican students in Kansas City, Kansas was not confined to the immigrant barrios of Armourdale and Argentine. In September 1924 a mob of at least 200 Anglo parents surrounded Major Hudson Elementary School and refused entry to four Mexican children who had been permitted to attend regular classes



*Pan-American Club (demolished), 617 Shawnee Avenue, Sanborn maps and Google aerial map showing change over time, compiled by Kathleen Bole.*

at the newly-built school in Rosedale. Over the course of the next 18 months, at the persistent urging of Mexican diplomats, the U.S. State Department intervened and eventually succeeded in requiring Kansas City, Kansas School District to educate the Mexican students. The State Department's intervention was prompted by entreaties from the Mexican Consul in Kansas City and the Mexican Embassy in Washington, which cited the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, as well as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (which guaranteed formal civic rights to Mexican Americans), in instating that the Mexican children be admitted to the city's public schools.

According to district records and local media accounts, the "racial problem" in Rosedale was "solved" in 1925, when the school district created a segregated Mexican classroom in the 1887 Melville School, the two-room, wood-frame schoolhouse that Major Hudson replaced. The creation of the Major Hudson "Mexican Annex" in Rosedale and the Clara Barton School in Argentine was consistent with *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision that sanctioned "separate but equal" education. It would not be until 1954, the same year that the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy* in *Brown v. Board of Education*, that the Court would agree in *Hernandez v. Texas* that minority groups other than African Americans were entitled to equal protection under the 14th Amendment.

Advocacy by Mexican workers themselves eventually opened the doors to integrated public education for the children of Mexican American immigrants throughout Kansas City, Kansas. Saturnino Alvarado, a shoemaker who operated a cobbler's shop from his home in Argentine, was determined to see his two teenaged children graduate from high school. At the time, the Kansas City School District made no accommodations for Mexican children to attend schools past the eighth grade, arguing that most would drop out to work or were otherwise uninterested in obtaining a high school diploma. Like the parents of the children in Rosedale, Alvarado pressed his case with the Mexican consul, and in 1930, some four years after his initial request, his son Jesse and daughter Luz graduated from Argentine High School. In 2003 the School District renamed the auditorium at Argentine Middle School (a more modern building that formerly served as Argentine High) in Alvarado's honor, and he was inducted into the Mid-America Education Hall of Fame at Kansas City, Kansas, Community College.

**TAG DAY---SATURDAY**  
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*of*  
**ARGENTINE**  
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The people of Argentine are in need of the privileges of the Auditorium, containing a place for Amusement, Public Meetings, Athletics, Banqueting and Public Entertainment.

The Parish House is sponsored by all Protestant churches of Argentine and is being supported by all those who see the actual need of our such an Auditorium.

*Argentine Parish House (demolished), 1448 S. 27th, east elevation rendering from Kansas City Kansas, June 3, 1921.*

By the early 1940s, the Kansas City, Kansas School District had determined (presumably in the face of dwindling enrollment) that Major Hudson's Mexican Annex was "no longer needed." The historical record is unclear as to when the basement classrooms at Emerson and Ingalls ceased operations. In a moment identified as deeply significant by many community members consulted during the survey, the Clara Barton School in Argentine was washed off its foundations and split in two by the 1951 Flood. The following school year saw Mexican American students admitted to the general population at Emerson Elementary for the first time since 1918.

### **Mexican Americans, Civil Rights and Urban Renewal**

Schools were not the only public facilities to which Mexican Americans in Kansas City were denied or limited access. Before the 1951 Flood, the Armourdale Community "Bath House" not only featured a gymnasium, community library and classrooms, but also an in-ground, outdoor swimming pool. According to local oral histories, before the 1951 Flood, Mexican Americans—who had been segregated to the worst housing in the eastern part of the neighborhood, adjacent to the Swift and Cudahy meatpacking houses where many worked—were not



*St. John the Divine Catholic Church, 2511 Metropolitan, February 15, 2011, Kathleen Bole.*

allowed to access this community facility. As a result, the local Mexican American community developed its own recreational facility, the Pan-American Club, which was located in the basement of a commercial building east of Seventh Street in Armourdale's barrio. Mexican Americans also participated in boxing matches held in the Skyline Center located in a commercial building on the south side of Osage Avenue, directly opposite the Bath House and Pool.

After the flood, according to community and published accounts, local Anglo residents opposed efforts to desegregate the pool. Community leaders opted to close and fill the in-ground pool rather than make it available to the large, local Hispanic population. Hundreds of those same families would be summarily dislocated from Armourdale less than a decade later, when the city used urban renewal to clear the Mexican barrio east of Seventh Street Expressway for the development of an industrial business park. The project also prompted the local school district to demolish John J. Ingalls Elementary School, the city's oldest operating school at the time, the site of which is occupied by a large industrial warehouse.

Urban renewal not only wiped out the final vestiges of housing and community, but also summarily obliterated the sites of community-owned small businesses and the sites of social institutions like the Pan-American Club. The transitory nature of local businesses was such that, despite hearing from many community residents about the important role they played in neighborhood life, the survey

team was not able to effectively document their locations and determine whether any of the structures survived (it seems unlikely, as their locations on the south side of Kansas Avenue were among the first sites cleared for the construction of light industrial facilities by the city's urban renewal program.)

### **Lessons Learned**

The survey sought to identify places, structures, and sites of significance to the Mexican American experience in Kansas City, Kansas, through a process of outreach and engagement with the local community. The project was intended to help to build public recognition, appreciation and respect for the life experiences, culture, and contributions of Hispanic Americans to our region's and our nation's heritage. By engaging the local community, the survey team also sought to build a grassroots constituency for Latino preservation, and to make historic preservation relevant to broader community goals, such as neighborhood revitalization.

The survey team did anticipate challenges in determining whether the sites identified as significant to the local community would meet the traditional criteria of significance for preservation purposes. They did not anticipate, however, how difficult it might prove to find direct documentary evidence that substantiated their locations, or even to document fully the significance of buildings that were known to have been lost.

This was especially true for the Melville School/Major

Hudson Annex, which appeared in city directories at erroneous addresses and was not included in the historic Sanborn atlases (due to the fact that the contemporaneous baseline map was created before the site was annexed to the city limits of Kansas City, Kansas). Ironically, the survey team located a 1940 newspaper article noting that the school district itself was unable to locate title documents at the time it was preparing to sell the school. Fortunately, we were able to locate the warranty deed transferring ownership of the building and site to a local church. By practical necessity, the deed contained a detailed legal description that finally confirmed the school's location, which has since been partitioned (but not formally subdivided) into four lots on which single family homes have been constructed. Additional confirmation of the school's location was obtained by examining a nearly century-old plat of subdivision for lands surrounding the school site.

In addition to identifying sites that were not well known or had been overlooked by previous efforts, the survey also identified social and institutional relationships between different neighborhood areas that have not been adequately documented. It was not surprising to learn, for example, that a Catholic church (Our Lady of Mount Carmel) was created in Armourdale to house a group of Mexican parishioners who had previously met in the basement of the nearby St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church. It was interesting to learn, however, that St. John the Divine Church in Argentine was originally established as a mission of Mount Carmel, with the two sharing a single parish priest. Likewise, Holy Name Church in Rosedale was originally established as a mission of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Shawnee, some six miles to the southwest, a fact that seems anomalous until one recognizes that, in the late 19th century, both communities were rural outposts on the Frisco Railroad outside Kansas City. Mount Carmel was destroyed by the 1951 Flood, while St. John the Divine was restored and continued to serve Mexican Americans from both neighborhoods for some four decades.

A further challenge is that the dozen or so notable sites and structures identified as potential candidates for preservation (including local churches, fraternal lodges, neighborhood community centers and longstanding Hispanic businesses) are not all recognized by public officials or community residents as worthy of preservation. A key case in point is St. John the Divine Catholic Church. Considerable anxiety exists among

residents of Argentine about the merits and feasibility of preserving this church, which has been shuttered for two decades and is seen by many as a blight and vestige of an oppressive era best forgotten. A local community development organization has proposed demolishing the church and replacing it with new market-rate housing, which has divided even past parishioners over the merits of preserving the structure, which is intact but in significant need of repair.

In retrospect, the study's most important finding was that Latino heritage is sometimes best represented through the oral history traditions and commemorative cultural activities of Kansas City's Mexican American community. For example, while the Clara Barton School was destroyed by the 1951 Flood, a sizeable but declining group of former students has held annual school reunions for nearly 40 years. The 2010 Clara Barton reunion offered a unique opportunity to engage community members in the process of identifying additional sites of importance, as well as to better identify important dates and relationships among the sites being surveyed. The results of the survey have played an instrumental role in stirring the interest of the Kansas City Museum in fashioning a public history agenda that includes collections development, educational programming, and exhibits exploring both the history of the local Latino community, as well as the stories of recent immigrants.

The Hispanic American Historic Places Survey of Kansas City, Kansas, will help educate all Americans about the struggles faced by immigrants as they assimilated to American society and culture. The reality that many ethnic communities occupy humble places, along with challenges of documenting sites that have been damaged or destroyed, determining whether they meet established criteria of significance, and whether there is community support for their preservation, all need to be recognized as harbingers of the challenges to implementing a traditional preservation agenda in the Latino community.

This project represents an important opportunity to tell the stories of immigrants seeking the American dream. The sites and places documented by the survey carry profound cultural and social meaning for Mexican American families in Kansas City. This project is a way of telling those stories, and helping to make these places relevant to all Americans.