

**SOUTH FLORIDA'S MEXICAN WAVE
AS AN ETHNIC GROUP, THEY TRAIL ONLY CUBANS THE 2000
CENSUS COUNTED 87,645 PEOPLE OF MEXICAN HERITAGE IN
THE TRI- COUNTY AREA, ALMOST DOUBLE THE NUMBER OF A
DECADE EARLIER**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The long-held stereotype that Mexicans living in the United States are all migrant agricultural workers is being challenged by changing times and a new wave of immigrants in South Florida.

“Initially, many of the Mexicans here were migrants, but that has changed,” said Leonor Vazquez of Parkland. “Times have changed too and there are many opportunities here now.”

Vazquez, whose husband is a stock broker, said that when she came to the United States as a child, she had to get over a number of hurdles to settle in. “We had to learn the language like any other ethnic group and we had to learn to assimilate,” she explained.

But, assimilation did not mean giving up her past. “We Mexicans carry our family values and the respect for Mexican heroes like Cesar Chavez,” she said. “I teach my children about our artists and what they represented, and I’m proud of my Indian heritage.”

Vazquez will be joining fellow Mexicans in this week’s celebration of the Cinco de Mayo celebrations held at several locations throughout south Florida.

“This holiday is not our independence day like many people think it is,” Vazquez explained. “It’s really the celebration of a battle where the minority stood up to the powerful and helped Mexicans realize that anything is possible.”

Also placing the holiday in a more philosophical mode, Janie Ramirez of Delray Beach said that it was about “freedom and liberty for Mexicans and Americans. It’s an American holiday as much as it is a Mexican holiday.”

To celebrate, Ramirez and her husband have helped to organize a Cinco de Mayo celebration in Palm Beach Country for five years. “We get help from local community development programs, city officials and Lake Worth radio station WLVS,” she said.

Vazquez and hundreds of other Mexican immigrants to South Florida represent a growing middle and upper class presence here along side thousands of migrant agricultural workers who are starting to settle here and become a part of the community.

“Those of us who came twenty years ago consider ourselves pioneers,” said Victor Floresmeyer of Miramar. “It wasn’t a lot of fun then. They didn’t have ethnic food in Publix and there weren’t many Mexican restaurants here then.”

“We worked hard to apply for our green cards and many people came illegally and then had to apply for amnesty,” Floresmeyer explained.

“Eventually we became a part of the community and shared our customs and music with others. Now, you can go to a Mexican restaurant and it is full of young Mexican families.”

Many of those families are coming here to open up a business or because they have been sent by companies back home to open a branch office in south Florida.

“There are many benefits to starting or operating a business here,” explained Fernando Jaramillo of Weston who works for a business consulting and human resources company. “For one thing, it’s easier to get credit here and access to credit is less costly. In the mid and long-term, there are benefits to being a minority certified company with access to federal and state contracts.”

Jaramillo said that businesses can also take advantage of tax breaks as a multinational company. “It is easier to market your product to Latin America from here and people consider you a leader if you are based in south Florida.”

The down side for Mexicans, according to Jaramillo, are cultural factors such as separation from family. However, he calls Florida a “middle point” because Mexicans can keep their Latin culture and take advantage of the context of where they live.

Jaramillo credits the Miami branch of the United States Mexico Chamber of Commerce with helping to make the adjustment of Mexican families and businesses easier.

“Our chapter has been here for five years and we have three main goals,” explained Elba Hertschel, executive director of the South Florida branch. “We want to promote businesses owned by Mexicans, we want to promote business between Florida and Mexico, and we want to promote business among our members.”

Hertschel said that the 2000 census counted 360,000 Mexicans in Florida, the third largest ethnic group by country of origin in the state behind Cubans and Puerto Ricans.

While between 80 and 90% of those are migrant workers, Hertschel said that the demographics are changing. “Mexicans used to go to Texas, California and Arizona, but since Governor (Jeb) Bush led a trade mission to Mexico in 1999, we see people looking to Florida as a great land of business development.”

Hertschel said that she has seen a “silent exodus” of investors and business people from western states looking to south Florida and moving to such areas as Brickell Key, Key Biscayne and Weston.

“We help those wanting to come here with the relocation factors like realtors, lawyers and schools,” she said. “Those who are coming are adapting well.”

Meanwhile, many of those who have come to South Florida as agricultural workers are staying on and parlaying their skills into other jobs that pay better and are less stressful.

“We see a little of everything,” explained Ali M. Brizzard, the Outreach Coordinator for Migrant Health Services of South Florida and Caridad Health Clinic in Boynton Beach, referring to the medical complaints of the 2,000 patients that her organization treats a month.

“Because they work in the fields, and often their boots get wet, we see a lot of foot fungus and dermatological problems,” she said. “We also see a lot of Diabetes because of heredity and diet and we treat a lot of hypertension.”

“Some of these people earn barely enough to eat let alone pay for prescriptions,” she explained. “So, they choose to feed their family.”

Brizzard said that her organization emphasizes education “to help them break the cycle of poverty. If we can change the life of just one person, we change the life of the whole family.”

Those who complete a computer training program are provided with a reconditioned computer system. “When they have that, they have a trade and never have to go back to the fields again,” Brizzard said. “They boost their self-esteem, they change their life and so they have less stress and hypertension.”

The working conditions of Mexican agricultural workers have changed such that many of them have been able to seek other, more permanent work. “In the last decade there has been a shift from working on row crops (such as tomatoes) which is seasonal to working in nurseries which is a six day, 52 week job,” explained Steven Kirk, President of the Everglades Community Association in the Homestead area of southern Miami-Dade County.

Obtaining that kind of work has meant that migrants no longer need to move between Florida and northern agricultural states to work all year. “They may get paid less per hour in nursery work, but it is an eight hour job all year,” Kirk said.

“This has made many of them more stable, blue collar residents,” he said.

Kirk reported that at least three predominately Mexican communities have been established near Homestead housing not only agricultural workers, but others who own restaurants, work in construction companies and retail stores.

“You cannot construct a home or play golf in south Florida without Mexican Labor,” Kirk said.

From whatever background, Mexicans are using this weekend as an opportunity to celebrate their heritage.

“Cinco de Mayo is a party day,” Floresmeyer said. “Actually, Coruna beer started the celebration in the United States,” he said, indicating that it was a good excuse to sell beer.

For Vazquez, the day has more of a cultural significance. “I want to carry into my children’s life who they are and where they came from,” she said.

Cinco de Mayo Celebrations

What: Cinco De Mayo festival

Where: Northwest Regional Library, 3151 University Drive, Coral Springs

When: 3 – 10 p.m., Saturday, May 3

Activities: Music, entertainment, games, food

Information: Call Joyce Campos at 954-344-1005

What: Cinco de Mayo Festival

Where: Old School Square, 51 N. Swinton Avenue, Delray Beach

When: 11 a.m. – 10 p.m., Saturday, May 3

Activities: music, games, entertainment, food

Information: Call Janie Ramirez 561-276-3396

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