

# Latino Neighborhoods

“Now we have customers there who are third, fourth generation customers, and they tell stories, ‘Oh, my grandma said she used to come here’ ... and here they are, thirty years later still coming in to buy their tamales.”

—Natividad Ramos (one of the current owners of La Borinqueña)

They stand as landmarks of a bygone era. All that remains visible of the original Latino *colonia* (neighborhood) of the East Bay are a handful of businesses in downtown Oakland: *La Borinqueña*, *Mi Rancho* tortillas, Mexicali Rose restaurant, among them. It is likely that only a few of their customers have an idea of their historical significance. For most people, they are merely places to buy a Mexican meal, or pick up traditional *pan dulce* (sweet bread), or grab a dozen of freshly made corn tortillas on the way home.

In 2003, just a short distance south of downtown, around the intersection of International Boulevard (14th Street) and Fruitvale Avenue, beats the current heart of the East Bay’s Latino community. Signs in Spanish punctuate storefronts, “Mexican” businesses mark the area, and street vendors seemingly direct from south of the border sell their fare on corners. The vitality of the Fruitvale area is apparent, and, particularly on weekends, when throngs of people fill the area, the bustle is reminiscent of the vibrant 7th Street *barrio* (neighborhood) of West Oakland that arose in the early 1900s. The two areas encompass the history of Latinos, most of Mexican origin, in the East Bay. Theirs is a history and community characterized by diversity, mobility, activism, and cultural flux.



**La Borinqueña Mex-icatessen and Specialty Shop on 7th and Jefferson in West Oakland. Established in 1944 as a Mexican specialty store, this landmark of Latinos in the East Bay continues to operate, just a short distance from its first location on 5th and Brush in the heart of the original *barrio* (neighborhood), 2003. Photograph by Jeremy Harris.**

## Diversity

*“I am fourth generation born in Colorado ... My great grandfather, he came from Quebec, Canada ... And he came [as a fur trader to this country] and he ended up in New Mexico and there he got married and they had seven children, and then he moved to Colorado to Del Norte, and my mother was born in Colorado ... And my grandmother, she’s Spanish and my grandfather was half Spanish and half French ... My father [Antonio Archuleta] was also from Colorado ... I came with my mother [to Oakland]. I was fifteen years old.”*

*—Frances Granados (born, 1928, arrived in Oakland in 1944)*

*“My folks come from Mexico, Guanajuato, Mexico ... About 1928, I guess [family arrived in Oakland] ... I was born in Maybury, West Virginia.”*

*—Trinidad Granados, (born 1925, husband of Frances Granados)*

The East Bay’s Latino community owes its diverse character to ongoing migration, from both within and outside the country. Puerto Ricans and Central and South Americans have made their way to this area over the course of the twentieth century, their journeys often concentrated during specific periods of time. Puerto Rico became an American territory after the 1898 war with Spain, and people from the island were allowed to enter this country freely after 1917. During World War I, and in the decade that followed, many Puerto Ricans crossed to the mainland to find work. Julia Rodriguez, for instance, arrived in Oakland in 1923 from her native island of Puerto Rico, after a ten-day trip: “five days by boat, five days over land [by train].” Central Americans, on the other hand, have arrived primarily since the 1980s, when civil turmoil wracked the region.



**International Blvd. in the Fruitvale district is reminiscent of a street corner in Mexico. The cultural presence of Latinos is everywhere in Oakland’s Fruitvale neighborhood, 2003. Photograph by Jeremy Harris.**

In numerical terms, however, those of Mexican descent overwhelm other Latino groups. Their migration has been steady since the early 1900s, so that by the end of the twentieth century, they comprise nearly seventy percent of the Latinos in the East Bay, according to the 2000 census. In this sense, there is a clear *sabor mexicano* (Mexican emphasis) to the Latino community of the East Bay. Generations of family members

from the first wave of Mexican immigrants live in the East Bay, while a steady stream of fresh immigrants continues to come to the region. Even during the Depression years of the 1930s, when immigration to this country essentially stopped, a few hardy Mexican newcomers found their way to Oakland. The World War II era brought yet another surge of immigrants as well as children born to those who migrated to the United States



**Eduardo Carrasco** the son of a Mexican immigrant and **Quiteria "Katy" Sierra** of Colorado as newlyweds, El Paso, Texas, 1945. Photographer unknown. Collection of Eduardo Carrasco.



**José Cruz** and his then sweetheart **Carolina Lopez**, who was born in this country, in front of the tent cabins of *bracero* railway workers in Oakland circa 1944. Collection of the Oakland Museum, gift of José Cruz.



**José Cruz** and **Carolina (Lopez) Cruz** more than fifty years of matrimony later in front of their home in San Leandro CA, 2003. Photograph by Jeremy Harris.

earlier. This demographic process has continued through the onset of the twenty-first century. According to demographers' forecasts, Latinos will make up about half the population of the East Bay by 2050.

The constant influx of migrants and immigrants has meant that the story of the Mexican community, for example, cannot be reduced to a generational narrative by emphasizing only the original wave of immigrants in the early 1900s and their children. Due to this history of persistent migration, social and economic differences have emerged within the Mexican community over time. The Latino community includes a wide spectrum of personal histories, social status, cultural expression, and political orientation. Consider the group's collective story, however, and the importance of these differences diminishes. It's a story of rebuilding lives, forming families, and overcoming hardships in the towns and cities of the East Bay. Though the individual life stories within the Latino community have unique qualities, their personal histories nonetheless point to a common saga of undaunted determination in the face of adversity.

#### Growth and Mobility

*"We stayed there [in Oakland] maybe two or three years and then we moved to 23rd Avenue ... And from there we moved to 34th Avenue. We stayed there a few years ... from there we moved to 88th Avenue, and we stayed there until I went to the service. And from there they [parents] moved to 98th Avenue."*

—Trinidad Granados

*"The agricultural fields? Well, little by little, they disappeared, they started to build [housing] tract after tract and more tracts ... everything [agricultural related] was cut down ... the cannery was left here ... then the cannery was gone."*

—Ernesto Nava

The constant entry of migrants from other states and immigrants from Mexico (and elsewhere from Latin America) took place in a changing landscape. The region became intensely urbanized during the 1950s. The construction of the Nimitz Freeway through West Oakland perhaps best exemplified this fundamental change; it essentially displaced the Oakland *barrio* and forced many of its residents to move elsewhere, notably the Fruitvale district. "The freeway and BART destroyed a lot of what was a Mexican community in West Oakland," Rosa Escobar recalls, "but those families moved to Fruitvale, that's why Fruitvale became so Latino."

The spread of West Oakland's Mexican population to Fruitvale mirrored the population's move to other parts of the East Bay, which accelerated as the region became suburban and the previous sites of production dispersed. The shipyards in and around Oakland closed, while canneries consolidated their production lines, and eventually shut down completely. Other food processing plants also closed or relocated away from the area.

Older residential sites, such as Russell City in the Hayward area, for example, were eclipsed by suburban growth. Meanwhile, the city of Concord witnessed a noticeable expansion of its Latino population by the 1980s, reflecting a trend initiated two decades earlier by the intersection of highways 680 and 24 on the eastern side of the Berkeley hills. As the "680 corridor" became increasingly suburbanized, many Latino workers moved to the area to address its labor needs. A few of the traditional *barrios* proved resilient in the face of these changes, such as the Decoto district of Union City, just to name one example. Nonetheless, the rapid and large increase of Mexicans and others of Latin American origin in the Fruitvale reflected a profound change in the East Bay, suggesting an enormously important transition.



## Activism

*“I think she supported, gosh, hundreds of campaigns. Anything that benefited or would help the city of Oakland, the community, the Fruitvale community ... she wanted to be a part of. She was always involved.”*

*—Twinkie Flores Bradshaw, speaking of her mother, Carmen Flores.*

The changes precipitated by the economic restructuring of the 1950s and its demographic consequences meant a shifting of the Mexican community, none more dramatic than that of the Fruitvale area. Greatly influenced by the civil rights struggles of that era, the move to Fruitvale especially transformed the Mexican community of Oakland, as it galvanized its collective voice to address concerns over social justice, political representation, and economic inequity. In this sense, the renewal of the Mexican *colonia* of Oakland, now centered in the Fruitvale, fueled a multifaceted effort on several fronts — political, economic, social, and cultural. The election of Latinos, most of them of Mexican origin, to various posts was perhaps the most visible indication of the Mexican community’s newly found voice. Joe Coto, for example, was the first person of Mexican origin to ever be elected to the Oakland City Council in 1974. His successful campaign signaled the political coming of age of Latinos of the East Bay. Since then, several Latinos have been elected to office in Oakland and surrounding communities, from city council and county board of supervisors positions to state senators and school board members.

This political mobilization of the community generated a push to improve social services, educational facilities, and cultural resources for the Mexican community. As a result, Latino-based organizations proliferated throughout the area, pushing with repeated success for the improvement of the conditions of

Mexican neighborhoods across a broad range of issues, from health care and public transportation to employment and educational equity.



**The construction site of the new Fruitvale Village complex next to the BART station is a sign of the expansion and growth of Fruitvale’s Latino community, Oakland, 2003.**

**Photograph by Jeremy Harris.**

## Social and Cultural Life

*“At that time, each [ethnic] group gave a cultural presentation [of their heritage] at the end of the school year ... and a few of us that were Mexican at the school [Prescott school of Oakland] said to ourselves that we could not be left out. So I started to encourage all the Mexicans in the school to do something ... and so we presented our Mexican number ... and we were not left out any longer.”*

*—Dominguita Velasco (born 1900)*

*“And for my mother, it was also very important that one know their heritage and their roots, their raices ... it didn’t matter who you were.”*

*—Melinda de la Cruz, speaking of her mother,  
Josie de la Cruz*

The contemporary bustle of the Frutivale speaks to its vibrant cultural life. Posters advertise the performance of Latino artists, while several murals in the neighborhood celebrate Latino heritage. Restaurants, bakeries, and meat markets abound throughout the busy area, and songs in Spanish waft through the doorways of many businesses, giving musical expression to the neighborhood’s cultural character. Equally important, the cultural life of Latinos extends far beyond the confines of the *barrio*, as mainstream society has been affected in various ways by Latino culture. Public libraries now carry works by Latino authors, galleries include Latino artists, stage shows feature works by Latinos, museums and public schools recognize traditional holidays, such as *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the dead), *Cinco de Mayo* (May 5th), and Mexican independence day (16th of September). These public displays of Latino heritage sustain the cultural pride of that initial generation of the East Bay, such as Dominguita Velasco, who first arrived in Oakland as a nineteen year old in 1920. Born in Mexico, she never turned her back to the cultural heritage of her native country.



**Dominguita Velasco (right) and friend pose in traditional costume. By the end of the 1920s, the West Oakland colonia (Mexican neighborhood) had consolidated into an established, vibrant community with the resources and self-assurance to affirm its cultural heritage, circa 1945. Collection of Oakland Museum of California, gift of Dominguita Velasco.**

More than a half-century later, the efforts of Dominguita Velasco were renewed by community activists, such as Josie de la Cruz of Oakland, who promoted the importance of culture to the struggle to improve the conditions of the Mexican community. The creation of the Latin American Library in 1967 in the Fruitvale was but one of several initiatives undertaken by community advocates, like Rosa Escobar, to showcase the cultural patrimony of Latin America generally, and that of Mexico more specifically. And very importantly, the continuing

influx of new immigrants has served to reinforce the presence and vitality of the East Bay's Latino culture.

The 7th Street *barrio* of Oakland of the early twentieth century has largely disappeared. Parking lots and new buildings have replaced most of the sites that thrived in the midst of the old colonia, such as movie houses like the Estrella, T&D, Rex; the *teatro* (theater) sign on 12th Street serves as an epitaph to the last movie theater to show Spanish language films in Oakland. The original Housewives Market, at one time a store popular with *barrio* residents, no longer exists, and Swann's Market has been completely reconfigured into a multi-use urban complex, barely recognizable as a historic shopping place for the Latino community of *calle siete* (7th Street). The East Bay, like Oakland, encompasses both old and new *barrios*, and one suspects, from demographic projections, the formation of still other *barrios* in the future. As Jose Arredondo has put it, "I think the Fruitvale is going to be Latino for a long time because of the infrastructure that's here, the support."

*La Borinqueña* will most likely continue to be a living monument to the historic resilience of the Latino communities of the region. The elders of those communities and their stories still survive, but their historic imprint remains too often lost among dusty photo albums in back corners of closets, in faded documents in rarely opened boxes, in unheard anecdotes by aging women and men at family gatherings. It is, however, a story that occasionally flashes before us, the contours of the past suddenly revealed by an inadvertent comment or the accidental discovery of an old picture. Yet, from such small incidents, histories of communities have been written, allowing for the recovery of forgotten vistas and for a fresh understanding of a common past.



The sign with the word *Teatro* (theater) is all that remains of Oakland's last movie house that showed Mexican films. This aspect of local Latino culture started in the 1930s, with the Estrella Theater, Oakland, 2003. Photograph by Jeremy Harris.



At their store counter, two generations of ownership of *La Borinqueña*, Natividad Ramos, and her daughter, Cristina Ramos together continue the business, Oakland, 2003. Photograph by Jeremy Harris.